RANCH ROMANCES

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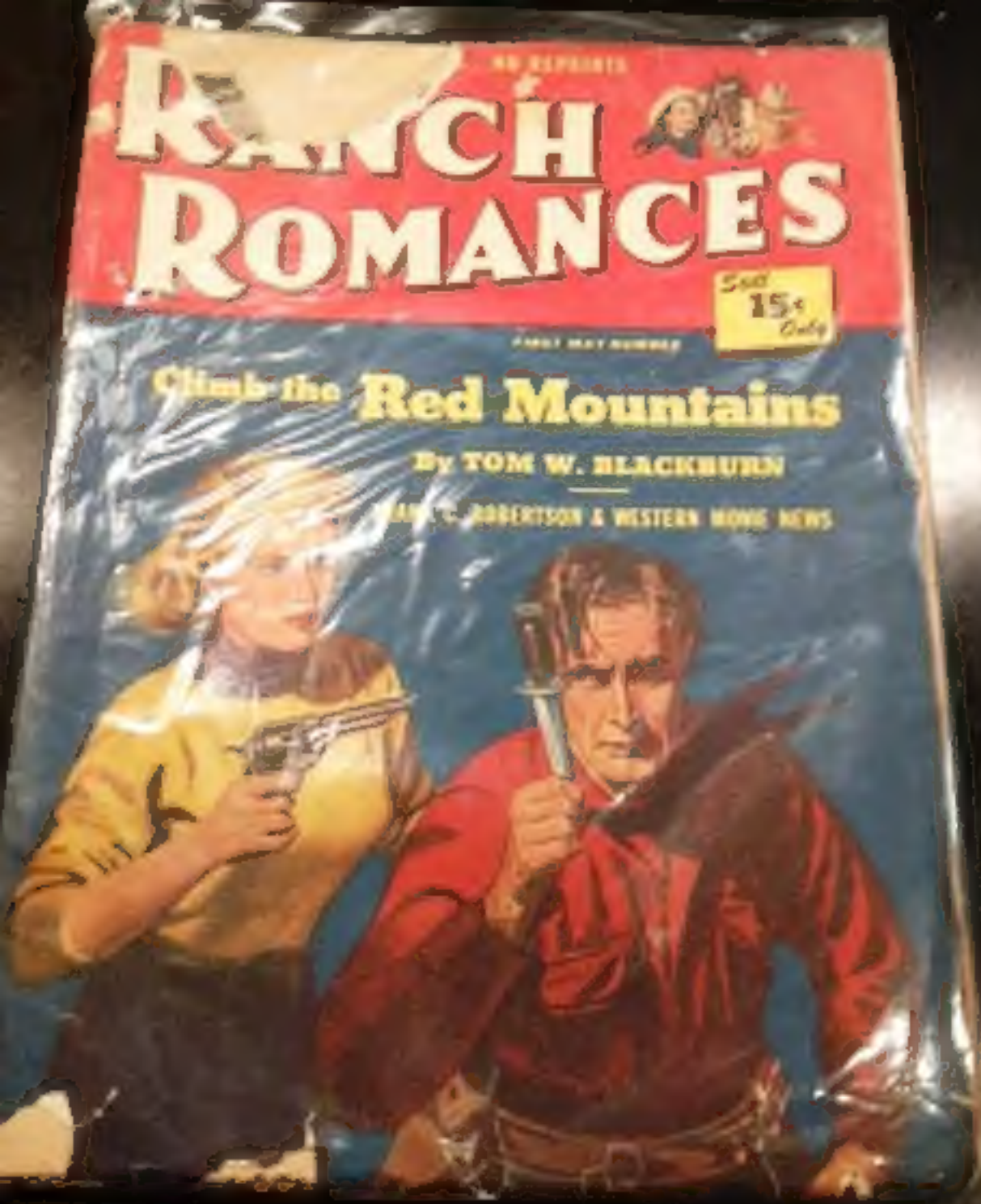
Climb the Red Mountains

By TOM W. BLACKBURN



FIRST MAY NUMBER

RANCH ROMANCES

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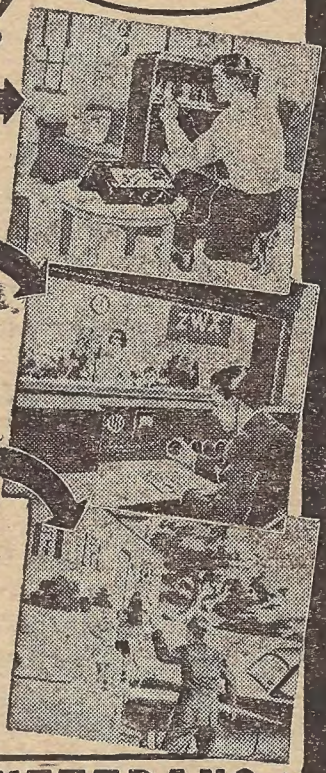

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TRAIL DUST

THIS DEPARTMENT will endeavor to cut sign on some of the colorful happenings of today's West and haze the stuff along to you—twentieth century trail dust, stirred up by folks in the cow country.

THE SALEM, Ore., Chamber of Commerce had a recent letter from an optimistic New Englander, requesting gold-mining information and a few samples of the ore.

FROM DENVER comes a no-rest-for-the-weary note. A patrolman, turning in at 4 A.M. after a long 8-hour beat, saw a prowler outside. After a lively chase around the block he got his man and turned him in; then turned in himself, with his fingers crossed.

A HOLLYWOOD chess club, true to its tradition for thinking things through carefully, recently named Virginia Mayo the most beautiful girl—for 1946. . . . In Southern California two thieves were frustrated; one was caught poring over a filched book on Alcatraz and its inmates, and another stole 50 homing pigeons who promptly homed.

WE'VE LEARNED recently that the worn spots in our new calfskin gloves, or the defective spots in our cowhide luggage, may be due to the use of the wrong type of electric prod while our accessories were still able to amble about their pens. We're now all out for the safe, commercial prods —effective, undamaging.

A DOG'S LIFE sentence was passed on a big mongrel in Dallas, Tex., after he bit a postman. The dog's been ordered tied up or corralled for the rest of his natural life. . . . In San Antonio, a clumsy and unsuspecting burglar fell through the skylight of a store and landed in the laps of two men installing a burglar alarm.

IN BETHANY, OKLA., parents of that blue-law town decided some rules needed revising when students went on strike because one of their number (male) kissed another (female). Such things are, by law, frowned upon.

IN WALLA WALLA, Wash., when an Iranian prince was arrested for passing rubber checks, they determined to deport him home rather than feed and clothe him at the state's expense.

WE'VE BEEN counting our blessings since hearing of the Oregon City, Ore., oil distributor who ran into trouble filling an order. One of his three trucks burned, another foundered in a snow drift, the last got mired in a ditch. While he pondered his problem, a message came that his mother's home was afire.

A THREE-YEAR-OLD from Durango, Colo., made recent man-bites-dog headlines when she bit her puppy as he bit a cookie she was biting. . . . In neighboring Cortez, they decided to build a dog pound—if they can catch a dog-catcher.

RANCH FLICKER TALK

THE state of Montana had its first motion picture première this year, and appropriately enough the movie was *Montana,* starring that fine Irish-born cowboy, Errol Flynn.

Errol admitted he was a little ashamed of playing a Western sheep rancher, not because he isn't a genuine Westerner but because the two times he's come in contact with sheep he's been an awful flop.

It happened in Australia, first when he got a job with a wool brokerage firm in Sydney. He got canned at the end of the first week because he didn't know enough about wool.

"Shortly after that," said Errol, "I got another job on a sheep ranch. They gave me the gate within three days because I didn't know enough about sheep. I still don't."

In the picture Errol plays an Australian imported to Montana because he knows more about sheep than any other man in the world.

"I felt such a terrible fake," said Errol.

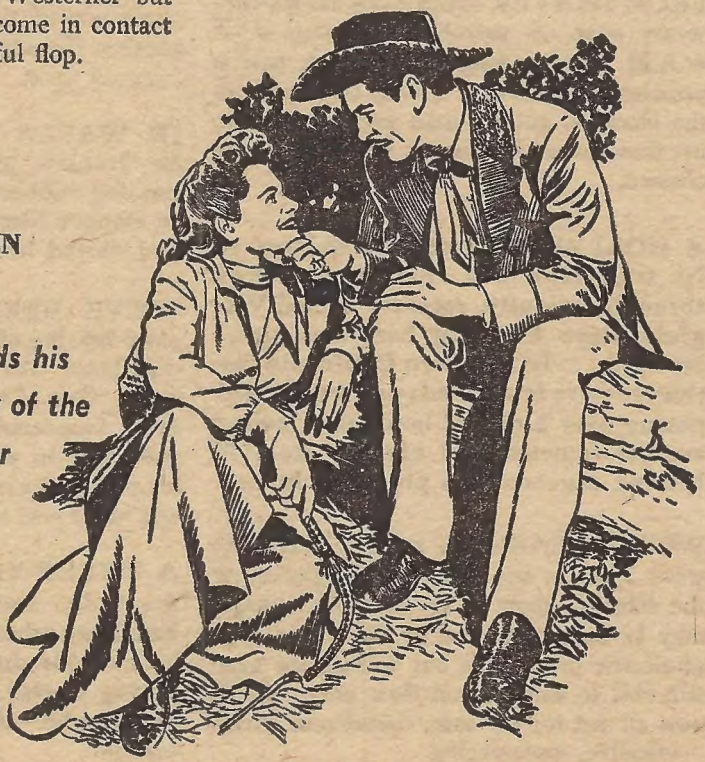
But Westerner or not, sheepman or not, he's the kind of actor who fits into a Western adventure film like a cowboy fits into his saddle.

Errol has always been pretty good in the saddle. In fact, in *Montana* he had more trouble getting out of it than staying in.

MONTANA

with ERROL FLYNN

A FAMOUS star adds his own glamor to the glory of the Northwest frontier



Errol Flynn and Alexis Smith

***Errol Flynn rides through frontier town with Paul E. Burns in the new Warner Bros. Technicolor Western hit,* Montana**

The script called for him to mount an ornery steed with a flourish and then get tossed into the dust. He had to do it twelve times before the director was satisfied by the way he hit the dirt.

Alexis Smith, the only girl in the movie, is in the enviable position of having 18 leading men. Her affections however are directed toward Errol, but, since she plays a cattleman's daughter, her anger is directed at Errol too. In several scenes she alternately kisses him and clouts him.

The kissing wins, though. Alexis and Errol have starred together four times. Some Hollywood statistician figured out that they've kissed each other 25 times in all, and eight of the clinches are in *Montana.*

The heavy excitement of the film is lightened by S. Z. (Cuddles) Sakall, who plays an itinerant peddler. Also in the cast is Joe Dominguez, a veteran of 34 years in front of the cameras, who has nine sons, all of whom are in the movies. Four of them, in fact, play in the action sequences in *Montana.*

Another prominent actor is Golden Cloud, a golden palomino-Arabian horse, who was too beautiful—even for Hollywood. He had to be deglamorized by make-up men, who rubbed his coat with milk to take the shine away, tangled his mane and rubbed in a little common ordinary dirt. It wasn't that the producers were afraid Golden Cloud would steal the beauty honors from Alexis Smith—just that he looked too glamorous to be the mount of a Montana sheepman, even if the sheepman was Errol Flynn.

BETH BRIGHT

"Things will be different," she said

JEROME HAD to side redskins who wanted his scalp, or white men who would kill him for his land

LANCE JEROME pushed back from the big table in the living room of the old DS ranch house. At the far end of the table Cleve Bresee scratched a match, touched it to the bowl of his expensive pipe, and grinned through the resultant smoke. Pablo La Paz watched Jerome with a deep frown of concern. Stephen Hawley's bony English face betrayed nothing whatever of his thoughts, although his eyes also followed Jerome. Lance was aware of their attention, but his interest was wholly in the girl across the table from him.

Laura Du Soe, mistress of the DS, was the key to this whole thing. The DS had been the first ranch on the benches above the Verde, discounting half-hearted Span-

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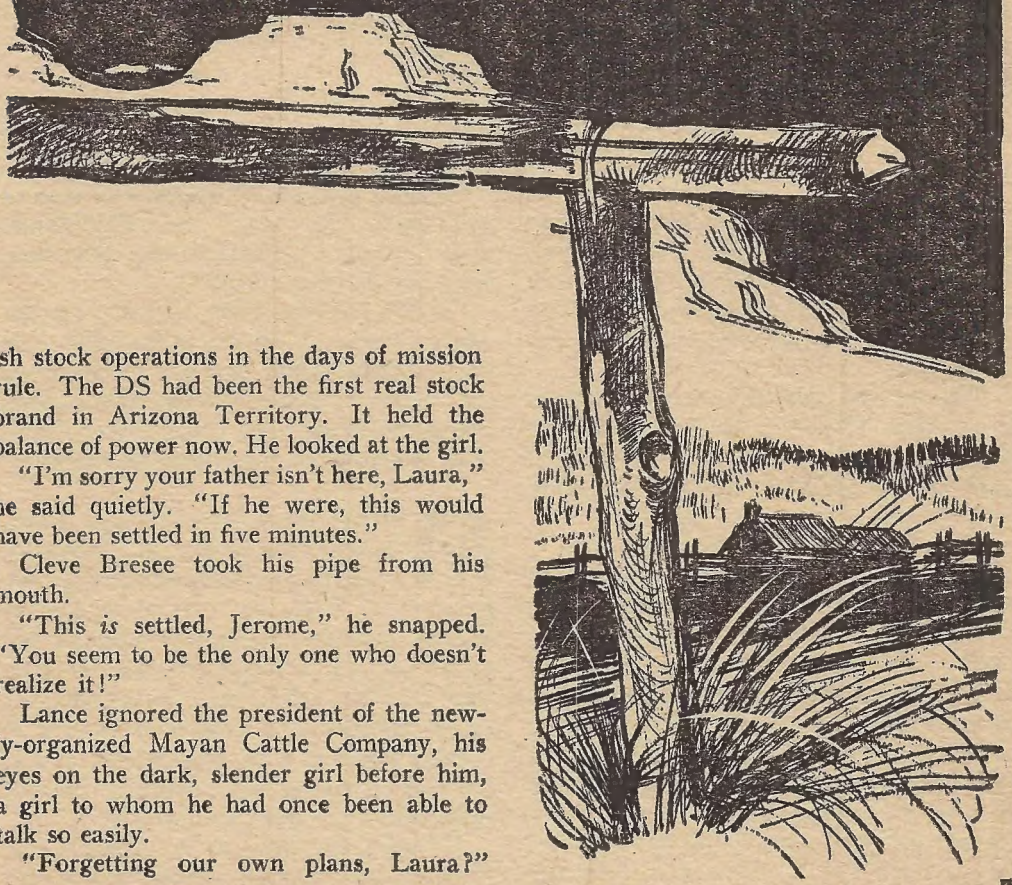


ish stock operations in the days of mission rule. The DS had been the first real stock brand in Arizona Territory. It held the balance of power now. He looked at the girl.

"I'm sorry your father isn't here, Laura," he said quietly. "If he were, this would have been settled in five minutes."

Cleve Bresee took his pipe from his mouth.

"This *is* settled, Jerome," he snapped. "You seem to be the only one who doesn't realize it!"

Lance ignored the president of the newly-organized Mayan Cattle Company, his eyes on the dark, slender girl before him, a girl to whom he had once been able to talk so easily.

"Forgetting our own plans, Laura?"

"I'm sure the plans you might have made with Miss Du Soe didn't involve land, Jerome," Bresee cut in again. "Suppose we leave sentiment out of this discussion."

Lance turned to face the man at the end of the table.

"You're new out here, Bresee. Got a lot to learn. There's a lot of sentiment in all of us about our land and our right to work it as we see fit. I'm doing the talking. Suppose you let me finish my say."

Laura Du Soe stirred uncomfortably.

"There really isn't any use, Lance," she said firmly. "We've made up our minds. The graze Mr. Bresee's company has already acquired practically cuts the four of us off. He's been fair enough to make it plain that although he doesn't mean to be unfriendly, the operations of his company will force him to deal unsympathetically with us if we don't come in with him. Pablo's willing to trade his two sections for stock in the Mayan Cattle Company under the circumstances. And I think Mr. Hawley is, too. How about it, Stephen?"

"More a question of what's wise than of willingness, my dear," the Englishman said carefully. "Whatever the DS does, the Lazy H goes along."

"That's just the point, Laura!" Jerome said earnestly. "The DS is the key. Stay out. Bresee's outfit can't get so tough we can't match it. You've been in Arizona long enough to know that. Your father didn't build the DS by backing down to anybody!"

MAYBE that's why he was killed, Lance," Laura Du Soe answered. "You're proposing something very impractical. With the Apaches digging in to make real trouble, and the railroad still so far away, it seems a time for us all to stick together, rather than falling out over a new neighbor just because it happens to be a corporation a lot bigger than any of us. I'm accepting Mr. Bresee's offer of stock in his company for the DS."

A hard ridge stood up on Jerome's jaw.

"You know you're letting the Mayan outfit completely surround my place. It

will cut me off from reliable water, making me helpless and my land completely valueless to me," he argued.

"Unless you take the block of stock Mr. Bresee offered you," the girl countered.

"Is that what I came to Arizona for—what any of us came out here for?" Jerome did not mean to let anger come into his voice, but it was there in spite of him. "To be a little piece in something so big that what we do and what we think doesn't count? Is that why Henry Du Soe settled here when he didn't have a neighbor closer than a three-day ride? We've talked a lot about what we wanted to build in this country, Laura. What Bresee's offering isn't what we'd planned."

"See here, Jerome," the flabby man at the end of the table growled. "You're making me seem a pretty bad sort. I don't like it!"

"A big man that can't tolerate small neighbors around him is apt to be a bad sort, Bresee," Jerome said flatly. "Pablo, there, is like me. He's got to have water from the DS in bad seasons in order to operate. If you get the DS, he's got to go along. His family's too big to take a chance on starving them. With Hawley it's cattle. He's got every dime he owns tied up in his shorthorn herd—and a lot of borrowed money, besides. He's got to go with the DS to save his stock and his notes."

"I know that," Bresee said impatiently. "What about you? You've been talking a lot. Let's have an answer."

"I can't work my range if I'm alone," Jerome said. "I know that well enough. But I've got little stock and no family. My answer's simple enough, Bresee. There's going to be a four-section square in the middle of your Mayan spread that you'll never own. And it'll be expensive for Mayan riders to trespass on it!"

Bresee put his hands down on the table

and shoved himself to his feet. Kicking back his chair, he came around the table to face Jerome, moving unhurriedly.

"That's one reason I don't like little neighbors," he said quietly. "There's always one trouble-maker among them that thinks he's got to shoot off his mouth, stir the others up, build himself into a tinplate hero. You think you can bluff me? You think a man doesn't get a few calluses, building up something like Mayan?"

"I'm not bluffing," Jerome said steadily. "I don't like your company, I don't like your deal, and I don't like you."

Jerome didn't see the blow start, partly because it was unexpected and partly because it was very fast. A flicker of movement and an explosion of violence against his face. Not at the point of his unprotected jaw, where a man who wanted to knock another down would strike, but a little higher, where there were teeth and soft flesh and lasting damage could be done. Jerome staggered back three steps and crashed into the wall so hard the windows of the solid old house rattled in their frames. He could feel the taste of blood in his mouth and the run of it on his lips.

"If you want a fight, mister, you'll get it!" Cleve Bresee said softly.

JEROME rocked unsteadily on his heels for a moment, watching the man through a clearing haze. Bresee appeared to be indolently relaxed, but it was only a pose. His seemingly flabby body was tense and there was explosive power in it. There was also a crowding dominance. The skirt of his coat had somehow gotten brushed back from the butt of the gun at his belt, and one hand hung low, near the weapon, not by accident.

Jerome was aware, also, of a figure suddenly darkening the porch doorway—Ed Gambrel, the renegade whose appointment as manager of Bresee's new Verde Valley outfit had made him more important than his well-earned reputation with a gun had succeeded in doing.

Pushing out from the wall, Jerome pulled the bandanna out from under the collar of his shirt and mopped at his puffing lips. They were badly split and he thought two teeth were loosened if not gone.

"I never hunted a fight in my life, Bresee," he said thickly. "And I never backed away from one. Hang onto your size as long as you can. I'm going to see you pulled down one day to where even Pablo could make a running rabbit out of you."

He turned, then, and crossed to the door. Ed Gambrel did not move out of the opening for a moment, but something in Jerome's unhurried advance made him step aside at the last instant. Lance went down the porch steps to his pony. He had freed the reins and was about to swing up when Laura Du Soe ran across the porch and down the steps to him.

"Lance, I'm sorry," she said swiftly. "But I'm afraid you asked for it. It's so foolish to buck Mr. Bresee. Can't you be reasonable? This is new country, wild and hard to operate in. And if the talk about the Apaches is true, we haven't even started to fight them yet. We need the protection of the kind of crew an outfit like Mayan can hire. It's the easiest way."

"That what you want?" Jerome asked her sharply. "The easy way?"

"Any plan is good till a better one turns up, Lance," the girl answered.

"It's come to that?" Jerome grunted. "Laura, is it you and Bresee?"

The girl shook her head.

"No, of course not. I hardly know the man. But Dad wanted to see something big grow up here. He believed this was that kind of country. I think the Mayan Cattle Company will amount to more than a combination of the DS and your Big J ever would alone, Lance. That's why I'm joining it."

"You know what you're telling me?" he asked softly.

"Yes, Lance," she agreed. "It will make some difference between you and me. I know that. But it wouldn't if you'd join Mayan, too."

"You heard what I told Bresee," Jerome said carefully. "If you join him, you'll be hurt, too. I can't help that, Laura. He's crowded us all into this spot. He won't stop

just here on the benches. And this country wasn't meant for crowding men. I'm going to break him if I can."

Th girl said nothing.

"If you change your mind, let me know, Laura. There may still be a way out for the DS."

"I told you, Lance," she answered. "I've already found the way I want."

Jerome stepped hard into his near stirrup and rose into his saddle. For a moment he wondered if he were being a fool. He reined his pony around, but Laura Du Soe had already started back up the porch steps. He touched his split lips with his tongue and savagely jumped his pony into a full run.

MICAELA RUIZ sat in the entrance of the little cave assigned to her and looked down into the pocket in the rocks below where the Apaches had set up quarters. The Indian who had brought up her evening meal was scrambling back toward his fellows without a backward glance.

Micaela had learned to know much of the Apaches in recent days, but she still wondered what kind of men they really were. Ghosts, evil spirits, the legion of the devil on earth—she had heard them called these things many times in Mexico. Here in Arizona, where they had carried her, certainly there were other names for them. English was a rich tongue.

Betakin's attack on Rancho San Luis had been a lightning stroke. Some of the Montoya family had died. Perhaps the fact that Betakin's men had not harmed the prisoner they had carried away from the raid was because they believed her a daughter of the Montoyas and worth keeping for the ransom they might extract. Perhaps when they discovered she was only nurse and teacher to the younger Montoya children, her treatment here might change.

Micaela wondered how far above the Border this camp was—how far the Apaches had carried her into Arizona. Far enough for her to see that here, at last, was a country worth living in, vastly different from the sere wastes of so much of Chihuahua and Sonora. She stared out across the little valley in which Betakin and his men had camped, wondering what lay beyond the red mountains to the north. And because she was looking at the skyline, she saw the approach of the scouting party before the camp sentinels became aware of it.

Half a dozen Apaches were returning to the camp with a male prisoner, a tall, angular, angry man riding a horse topped with an Arizona saddle. In this air, distance amounted to little and Micaela could study the prisoner's face. It was not handsome, but it was a strong face. The prisoner rode with the same half-graceless ease of the Apaches, as though frequent necessity to cross vast distances had taught him to be patient and unhurried in his saddle.

Camp sentinels spotted the approaching party presently, and a number of Apaches rode out to meet it, brandishing lances at the prisoner and shouting insults at him. He was brought into the camp and ordered to dismount before Betakin. He looked steadily at the haughty chief of the red raiders, his voice carrying clearly to Micaela.

"Apache?" he asked. "What Apache? Tonto—Mescalero? What business here? What chief—Cochise, Victorio, Mangus Coloradas?"

"Apache!" Betakin answered fiercely. Micaela felt pride for him. He spoke to this enemy in a stately English nearly as excellent as that Micaela had learned from her flame-headed Irish father in her almost forgotten girlhood. "All Apache are *dine,* now —brothers. I am Betakin."

The prisoner betrayed his first sign of uneasiness. "Betakin, the Butcher!" he muttered.

"Soldier of my people!" the Apache corrected sharply. "You asked our business here. What is yours?"

"My name's Jerome," the prisoner said. "Lance Jerome. A rancher from the Verde benches. I've got wolves on my heels. Didn't expect to run into red ones in front of me!"

"You're followed?" Betakin asked him. "Who follows you?"

"Don't know their names, except maybe one. Just who set them after me—" The man paused and laughed suddenly. "Puts us in sort of the same boat, Betakin," he went on. "Seems I've got some land somebody else wants and they're hunting me to get it. That's your trouble, too, isn't it?"

THE APACHE ignored this. Swinging to the nearest of his men, he issued swift orders. A dozen Apaches mounted and rode swiftly in the same direction from which the scouting party had come. Micaela watched the prisoner below, wondering if she was to see him treated as some of the *vaqueros* at the Rancho San Luis had been treated. She shuddered a little. Betakin swung back to face the man from the north.

"Soon we see who is following you. Now you tell me why they follow."

Lance Jerome shrugged and began a terse description of the organization of a cattle company somewhere beyond the red mountains. Micaela had been with the Montoyas long enough to know something of the problems of stockmen in arid country. Listening carefully, she pieced the information Jerome gave Betakin into as much of a picture as she could manage. When Jerome was finished, she didn't understand completely why this Mayan Cattle Company was his enemy. Betakin, however, surprisingly seemed to find Jerome's information completely comprehensible. He nodded gravely.

"You tell one story. Perhaps your enemy tells another. He will be brought here soon. Maybe you have showed Betakin how to kill many enemies; maybe you have showed him a plan. If not—" the Indian shrugged expressively— "then you die. That way Betakin has at least one dead enemy."

The Apache issued further orders. Lance Jerome was shouldered up the slope to share the cave Micaela occupied. For the first time she let herself begin to think of the ransom messenger who had ridden back to Rancho San Luis. She could afford to think of it, now. This tall, dusty man did not look like one who would wait for the Apaches to make up their minds whether he should live or die. Perhaps there was a way to escape, after all.

Stumbling up the rocky slope ahead of his captors, Jerome cursed himself steadily. He should have known that Cleve Bresee would not have approached the land owners on the Verde benches with his proposition, until he had planned a way to take care of them should they refuse him. He should have realized that the hardcases Ed Gambrel had signed onto the Mayan payroll for Bresee would already have their orders concerning Lance Jerome if he kicked over the traces at the meeting in the DS ranch house.

He had been a fool to go back to his own place at all. There had been nothing left in the ashes he could have used. He should have known that attempting to trail the stock driven from his breached corrals would lead him into a Mayan trap. He had judged Bresee a thorough man and had preached his judgment to Laura Du Soe. Yet he could not follow it himself.

The past two days wheeled again before his mind. He was not a man who cared for running, and Gambrel's men had pushed him hard. The Apaches riding out after them would not have far to go. Obviously Gambrel's orders had been to run Lance Jerome clear out of Arizona or plow him under, making the job look like Indian work, just as the ruin of his homestead had been made to look enough like Indian work to be convincing.

It was the kind of luck a man occasionally had in the middle of a bad run that there happened to be a real band of Apaches this close to the Verde. He had little faith in the red wolves, knowing their habit of unreliability, but still there was now a chance he could turn this to his own use. Gambrel and his men were whites and therefore as much enemies of the Apache as he was himself. When Betakin gave him another chance to talk he might be able to dump Gambrel and his whole bunch into the middle of a hot fire.

Not that this settled anything except to get the bunch hunting him off his backtrail. Mayan was already bigger than one foreman and one bunch of hired riders.

The Apache glared at her suspiciously

Getting rid of Gambrel was not restoring the Verde benches to the control of those who really owned them. Getting rid of Gambrel didn't get rid of Bresee or his company.

Exhaustion was pulling at Jerome. He was breathing heavily when he reached the mouth of a small cave under the overhang capping the slanting wall above the little valley in which the Apache were camped. His captors grunted and indicated this. Jerome bent and stepped into the shallow cavern. A shadow moved in the dark interior and he blinked as a girl rose to face him.

This was no Apache woman. There was no touch even of Yaqui in her. She was dark of hair and eyes, but had fair skin—an extraordinarily beautiful girl with a wide, firm mouth, a full figure, and an erect kind of pride which might have seemed haughtiness except for the complete straightforwardness of her attention. No wonder it was hard to fight the Apaches. There was not limit to the surprises of which they were capable. Jerome removed his hat.

"I have been listening," the girl said quietly. "I know your name and what you told Betakin. I am Micaela Ruiz, nurse to the children of the Montoyas at Rancho San Luis, below the Border."

"That's where this bunch came from?" Jerome asked. "Raided old Montoya's ranch, then ducked up here for safety. They'll pull a raid here now, and skip back to Mexico till their trail's lost. Why'd they bring you? Ransom?"

The girl nodded. "They think I'm Don Felipe's daughter. But the messenger for the money has been gone three days. Soon they will find out the truth."

"Your luck's wearing about as thin as mine, isn't it, miss?" Jerome asked. He dropped down to the floor, his hat in his hand, and propped his back against the wall of the cave. A wooden bowl, obviously stolen from a ranch kitchen and now filled with food, sat on the floor. The girl indicated it. Jerome shook his head in thanks, started to build a cigarette, and decided he was too tired to smoke. He tilted his head against the rock wall at his back.

"I was stolen from a big ranch; you are running away from one," the girl said. "The Apaches have us both. This is not a good place to stay."

"No worse than the one I left," Jerome told her without opening his eyes. The girl stirred. He raised his lids to glance at her. She apparently accepted his refusal to talk as his right. Jerome vaguely realized his arrival must have meant at least a flash of hope to her. He thought that when he'd caught his breath he'd have to talk with her. Certainly a man couldn't let Apaches have a woman like this without making some gesture to get her away from them. She might have been a kind of servant in Mexico, but in the woman-hungry hills of Arizona Territory she was considerably more than that.

Jerome thought he'd like to look at her a little longer, but it was quiet in the darkness of the cave, and he had been riding hard for a long time. His eyelids lowered again.

JEROME was uncertain as to what had aroused him or how long he had slept. Micaela Ruiz sat as she had when he last closed his eyes, looking at a long stick she held in her hands. He thought at first he had dozed only briefly, but darkness gathering beyond the mouth of the cave indicated a pair of hours had passed. He stirred, and the movement drew the girl's attention. She indicated the Apache camp below the cave.

"Signal guns out there," she said. "They wakened you. I think the Indians found the ones who were following you and are bringing them in."

Jerome half rose, as though to move to the entrance of the cave. The girl stopped his with a cautioning gesture.

"Wait. They aren't here yet and there is much I don't understand."

"About me?" Jerome asked.

"Can I get away from here alone?" the girl countered bluntly. "Your luck is mine, I think. I must understand. This Mayan Cattle Company you spoke about to Betakin—these ones who burned your house,

tried to trap you, and followed you here—they did this because you wouldn't sell your land?"

"Trade is a better word," Jerome corrected, amazed at how much of his brief talk with the Apache chief the girl had absorbed. "For stock in their company."

Micaela Ruiz nodded. "Yes. They want your land and drive you away to get it. But what of the others whose land they wanted, the ones who took their offer of stock?"

"Nothing'll happen to them," Jerome growled. "They'll take orders from Bresee and keep out of his way and have nothing to do but twiddle their thumbs, but they'll get enough dividends to live on. The Verde benches are made for stock. Mayan can't help but make money. They'll get a share of it."

The girl looked earnestly at Jerome. "In Mexico it is not desirable for a woman to think, but I have been much alone and have had to look out for myself. And my father was a *Yanqui,* a very good thinker. I have been thinking about you while you slept. Will you listen?"

She was so grave and intent that Jerome could not suppress a grin.

"Sure," he said. "Go ahead."

Micaela held up the long twig she had been fingering.

"This is the cattle company, this Señor Bresee's plan. He has this and a little money at the start. He wants more land, so he trades—" The girl broke off a piece of the twig and put the piece down. She broke off two more pieces and put them down, also.

"He trades several times," she went on. "Each time he has more land for his company, but look what happens to his own share in the whole thing. Each time he trades, he has a little less left for himself. Soon his own share is smaller than some of those he has traded off."

She broke off more pieces from the twig and held up a final tiny fragment. "If this man's idea was to make the whole country better, to make those he traded with rich, he would not care that he had little left for himself. But if he wishes to be a great *hacendado* like we have in Mexico, with everything for himself, he will want more than this little share. He must do something, then."

Jerome's jaw tightened. Involved in his own problem, he had not thought of this. The girl's logic was unassailable. "You're right," he agreed. "Bresee'll have to get the shares he traded off back."

Micaela nodded solemnly. "With a woman it is easy. He can marry her to get back her shares. With a man, he must use a bullet. It was best you didn't make the trade he offered you. This way you know he is your enemy. If you had made the trade you might not have known he planned to kill you—until it was too late."

The girl dumped the broken sticks onto the ground, her point made, and Jerome rose stiffly to his feet.

A stir in the Apache camp below drew his attention. He moved to the cave entrance and looked down. The party Betakin had earlier dispatched was returning. There were stock horses and stock saddles in the party. A quick count persuaded Jerome the newcomers among the Indians were Ed Gambrel and the Mayan bunch.

THE NEWCOMERS were pushed forward to face the chief. Firelight fell on them, and Jerome saw his earlier guess as to their identity had been accurate. Ed Gambrel's brassy voice carried clearly up the slope.

"What the hell is this?" he demanded harshly. "We're running a man and closing in on him when your bucks cut in on us. We wanted that son, Chief! Where is he? You got him?"

"Tall man named Jerome?" Betakin asked. "Riding plenty tired horse?"

"That's him," Gambrel agreed dourly. "Where is he?"

"We talk of him after while," the Apache answered. "First we talk about you and your men."

"Betakin, ain't you?" Gambrel growled. The Apache gave Gambrel the same answer he had earlier given Jerome.

"Soldier of my people!"

"Red butcher!" Gambrel spat. "All

right, you're expecting us, then. You got a message from Bresee. But you're ten days early and camped in the wrong place. Things get too hot in Mexico?"

"Apache chose own camp and when to move," Betakin answered. "A trap is easy when white men know where Apache is."

"This is no trap—for you," Gambrel protested. "A chance at plenty of stock, some guns, a few scalps. Turn over the man I been trailing, and I'll tell you how Bresee figures you should work this."

"Tell plan first," Betakin said firmly. "I listen."

"All right, here it is. Give me time to get back to the Verde, then move. Bresee sent you a marked map. Use it. We've already taken care of Jerome's place. Forget that. Make a fake pass at the DS Ranch. That's to be our headquarters from here on, so we'll be there. It'll look like we stood you off. The La Paz place and Hawley's ranch are right on up the draws. Take anything you want at both places, but leave plenty of 'Pache sign and no witnesses alive. We'll move out from the DS and close Horse Tail Pass behind you long enough to give you a good start back toward the Border."

"The money?" Betakin prompted. "Much money was promised."

"If everything's gone right by the time you get back to the pass, the money'll be there. Now, where's Jerome?"

"Bresee is afraid of this Jerome. Apache trust nobody. When Apache have money in pass, then we give up this man Bresee wants."

Gambrel seemed to sense the uselessness of further truculence. He shrugged.

"All right, so long as we get him, Chief."

Betakin spoke to his watching men. "These are guests. Feed them." With this order, the Apache turned and walked away from the fire.

Jerome found his fingers were clamped with painful tightness about the arm of the girl beside him. He released her.

"This DS Ranch—Hawley and the Mexican he spoke of—they are your friends?" she asked quietly.

"Neighbors," Jerome answered. "I'm a fool, girl. I could have killed Bresee for hitting me in the face three days ago, and I didn't! Calling in Apaches!"

He began to study the slope before the cave and the location of the idle guard stationed a few yards from the entrance.

Micaela Ruiz spoke quietly. "There isn't too much time. Take me with you."

Jerome shook his head. "Too much risk. You're better off here."

"Until the ransom messenger comes back empty-handed from Mexico, yes," she agreed. "But until he finds I am worthless, Betakin will think me valuable. I could be useful, Lance Jerome. You might have to make a deal with Betakin."

"Using you?" Jerome grunted. "If I can get clear of this camp, I'll get a warning to the Verde. I won't need you for that."

"I'm coming with you," the girl said stubbornly. "Leave me, and I'll set them on you!"

Jerome glanced angrily at her. "No choice, have I?"

She smiled and shook her head, then pointed to a little ell in the valley where the Apaches had bunched their horses. Three or four men were leading the animals of Gambrel's party down to join the herd.

Micaela was a prisoner

"Plan about the horses," Micaela Ruiz said. "They will soon catch up other wild ones here in these hills, but we can get a start. Apaches are helpless without horses."

"What did you teach old Montoya's kids in Mexico besides Indian fighting?" he asked dryly. "Tell me how we can get rid of that guard over there."

THE PALMS of Jerome's hands were damp. He wiped them against his thighs and glanced at the girl crouching beside him. Her brows were earnestly knit, but she seemed completely devoid of uncertainty, as though escape from the camp of hostile Apaches were a familiar problem to her. He speculated for a moment on the kind of life she must have led below the Border. Too intelligent to be a successful servant, too proud to make her life easier, as some women might have done, but without family and without money, wholly on her own. He thought he'd like to hear her tell about it some time, if they managed to get away from here.

Gambrel and his men were at the end of the meal their Apache hosts had provided. An occasional surge of coarse laughter indicated the Apaches might also have afforded them a jug of *tiswin* or they had brought their own bottles with them. The Apaches seemed to have relaxed for the night, their sentries out and three horse guards posted. The Apache on duty beyond the cave mouth rose and began to pace a little, restlessly. Micaela Ruiz murmured something and tensed beside Jerome. The Apache approached the rock Jerome and the girl had agreed upon as a marker. Micaela came to her feet and stepped out of the cave. Jerome picked up the fist-sized stone he had already selected and wrapped the fingers of his right hand tightly about it.

The Indian guard immediately spotted Micaela as she stepped from the cave. He grunted a warning at her. She continued to move until he swung toward her. She halted, then, but did not turn back to the cave, making the Indian cross the distance between them and bringing him as close as possible to Jerome's position in the entrance. The Apache seized the girl roughly and attempted to turn her back. She jerked angrily away.

"Water," she said. "I want water." She made a gesture as though drinking.

The Apache glared at her suspiciously for a moment, then pivoted toward the camp, obviously to call down to his fellows there. As the Apache turned, Jerome leaped. He took three strides and swung the rock in his hand. The Indian's mouth opened and closed. The rock made an ugly sound against the crown of his head. Micaela slid close, not attempting to catch him, but letting her body cushion and silence the Apache's fall.

Jerome sprawled silently down beside her, stripping the crossed cartridge bandoliers from the Indian's torso. The loops of the bandoliers were studded with clumsy brass shell-cases for the rebuilt Henry rifles which had become common contraband in trade with the Apaches. In addition, a makeshift holster dangling from one shell-belt contained a heavy old double-barreled Allen percussion pistol which Jerome hoped, by the absence of powder horn and shot pouch in the Indian's gear, had been re-breeched for the Henry cartridges.

These were the details he had not been able to determine in the darkness, and he grunted satisfaction as he came again to his feet.

The camp below remained quiet. Micaela Ruiz scrambled across the slope and came back with the guard's rifle, left where he had earlier been sitting. Jerome hooked the Henry over one arm, gripped the girl's elbow, and started diagonally down the slope toward the bend in the draw where the horses were held.

Moving cautiously, they were able to reach the floor of the draw between the the Apache camp and the horse herd. A kind of timothy, ripened to tinder dryness, was thick underfoot and only one of the horse guards was on this side of the herd. Cautioning the girl with the pressure of his fingers, Jerome approached close to the guard.

He saw over beyond the man some of the horses belonging to the Mayan party, which had been left bridled and saddled by the Apaches.

JEROME was grateful for the *tiswin* which had kept Ed Gambrel's men so busy that none of them had yet come down to strip their animals for the night. Finding a particularly thick bed of timothy foxtails, Jerome knelt and pointed to the saddled horses. Micaela Ruiz nodded understanding. Taking three shells from the loops of the bandoliers now crossing his own shoulders, Jerome worked the bullets from them and spilled the powder of their charges out onto the dry grass. He turned his face to the wind and found it was right, blowing with evening freshness away from the Apache camp and toward the horse herd. He drew the big pistol and cocked both hammers.

Micaela rose and ran soundlessly toward the nearest of the saddled animals. Jerome fired one barrel of the pistol into the powder in the dry grass, igniting a great patch of this in an instant. By the light of this he sighted carefully and fired the other barrel of the pistol at the nearest horse guard just as the Apache leveled his rifle at Micaela. The guard went down and the girl vanished among the rearing horses.

Catching up the rifle the girl had salvaged from the sentry at the cave, Jerome ran after her. Behind him the Apache camp was in sudden turmoil. Indian cries of angry alarm mixed with the startled cursing of the Mayan crew. Ahead of him were the girl, with two horses, if she was lucky, and the remaining pair of Apache guards beyond the herd. Moving almost with him, racing through the dry stuff underfoot, the fire Jerome had started was reaching toward the horses.

Jerome plunged into a dutsy maelstrom of rearing animals which were already milling in terror of the approaching flames. Micaela Ruiz loomed out of the tangle, fighting to control her mount and another she held for him. Jerome caught the dangling reins, swung up, and wheeled the horse.

"Straight down the draw!" he shouted to the girl. "Drive them ahead of us!"

Micaela expertly jerked her pony about and the two animals drove against the frightened herd. Raising the heavy Henry, Jerome fired a shot over the herd to add to its frenzy and an instant later a second shot at another Apache guard who appeared momentarily among the animals. The ponies broke, then, turning to begin a frantic run away from the fire licking along the ground—away from the Apache camp.

Jerome and the girl rode close after the horses, choking in the dust they churned up. They could not see the footing over which they raced and their own mounts ran with the herd, seemingly as terrorized.

Shouts and gunfire fell away behind, along with the glow of the grassfire Jerome had set and the winking of earlier supper fires in the Apache camp. Short of a quarter of an hour the racing herd began to slow of its own accord and fan out, its terror wearing thin. Jerome thought there were fewer saddled mounts among the animals than there should have been. Some of the Mayan stock, encumbered, perhaps checked by dragging reins, had likely dropped out during the run.

A few of these might be retaken in an hour. In another hour Betakin and Ed Gambrel would have pursuit started. But two hours was a wide start in this country. Jerome reined away from the slowing herd, signaling the girl to follow. He slanted up the side of the draw to the crest of a ridge, where light and footing were better, and swung northward at a steady lope.

TWICE before midnight Jerome halted to provide a rest for Micaela Ruiz, under the assumption a woman would find the gruelling pace a difficult ordeal. Both times, however, Micaela was no more eager to dismount and stretch than he was himself. And at the second halt it became obvious her horse was holding up better than his own. She mentioned this and passed it off as due to the superiority of her animal. Jerome did not correct her although he had been aware from the beginning that she had deliberately mounted the poorer of the two horses she had caught up at the edge of the Apache pony herd, leaving the better one for him.

After the second halt, Jerome ceased to

be concerned for the girl, and pulled up to sacrifice a little of whatever lead they had on the pursuit behind them only when his own horse was in danger of giving out. The night seemed endless. Jerome rode hunched slightly forward, his attention on footing, country, and trail, his mind absorbed with the danger facing the Verde.

Grey light was beginning to silhouette the eastern ridges faintly when they rode down to a ford on the first of the tributaries to the Verde. They paused to water their horses here. Jerome glanced at the eastern sky.

"Two hours to the DS, if our luck holds," he said. "We'll be in time, if the Apaches don't know a short-cut I never heard of. We've covered ground tonight!"

"Much ground," Micaela Ruiz agreed. "Sorry I made you bring me?"

"No. Why?"

"I just want to know," the girl answered. She frowned a little. "The DS ranch—it belongs to the woman among your neighbors?"

"Laura Du Soe. Gambrel said Bresee's using it for his headquarters, now."

"Then Betakin will not make a real attack against it. Shouldn't the others be warned first?"

Jerome shook his head.

"There'll be enough time to get to them all. The fact that Bresee's on the DS proves Laura doesn't have any idea what he's doing. She's got to know he's setting Apaches on his own people. I—well, I owe her first warning."

Micaela shrugged. "A woman can believe only one man at a time. Are you sure this woman will believe you?"

Jerome made no answer, and the girl said nothing more. Their horses watered, they swung again to saddle and rode away from the ford, angling now toward the richly grassed benches rising above the Verde.

IT WAS still a little short of dawn when Jerome pulled up on the crest of a low, piney ridge and pointed down the slope before them. The DS lay in the deep shadows lying across the bottoms, which seemed very close in the clarity of the early air. Micaela shivered a little at the chill in the scrubby timber and tried to make more of a covering of her ragged shirt than the scant material afforded. Her eyes studied the buildings below. Finally she turned to Jerome.

"Some horses in the corrals, but they haven't been ridden tonight. Sweaty horses could be put in the barn, out of sight. No sign of Indians, but Apaches are never easy to see. Still, it looks quiet. Maybe you'll deliver your warning. Let's ride down and see. Maybe the woman will believe you."

Jerome twisted in his saddle.

"This is as far as we go together," he said. "I can handle things down there better alone."

The girl continued to look evenly at him.

"It's the woman," she said. "The woman is not to know we've ridden all night together. She's not to see me. You've talked of all your neighbors, but it's really only the woman you've been thinking of, Lance Jerome!"

Jerome considered this for a moment. Laura Du Soe had been the most important part of his thinking for a long time. But she had ended that when she decided to take stock in the Mayan Cattle Company. She had herself made it plain that her decision ended the earlier plans they had worked out together. Micaela's charge was therefore not wholly accurate. He had been thinking of Laura, but he had been thinking of the La Paz family and Stephen Hawley equally as much. It was just that the DS was the lower end of the draws and the others were higher up. The DS was the logical place to begin a circuit of warning.

"You'll be safe here in the timber," he told Micaela. "Just stay out of sight. It won't take long to get to all three places. Hawley has his own riders. He'll be able to hold Betakin off, once he's warned. The DS is strong enough, too. But I'll probably have to stay at La Paz till the danger's past. Pablo's short-handed. At worst, I'll be back here by sundown."

"You are coming back?"

"By sundown."

"Why?"

"You got to have an answer to that?" Jerome asked uncomfortably.

Micaela shook her head and smiled. "Not now. I can wait till sundown for it. Good luck, Lance."

Jerome rode close to her, shrugging out of a bandolier of cartridges. He passed this and the Henry rifle across to her, knowing he could replace it from extra weapons available at the three ranches he would presently visit.

"Here, keep this."

"In case I need it?" she asked.

"You won't. Just keep it."

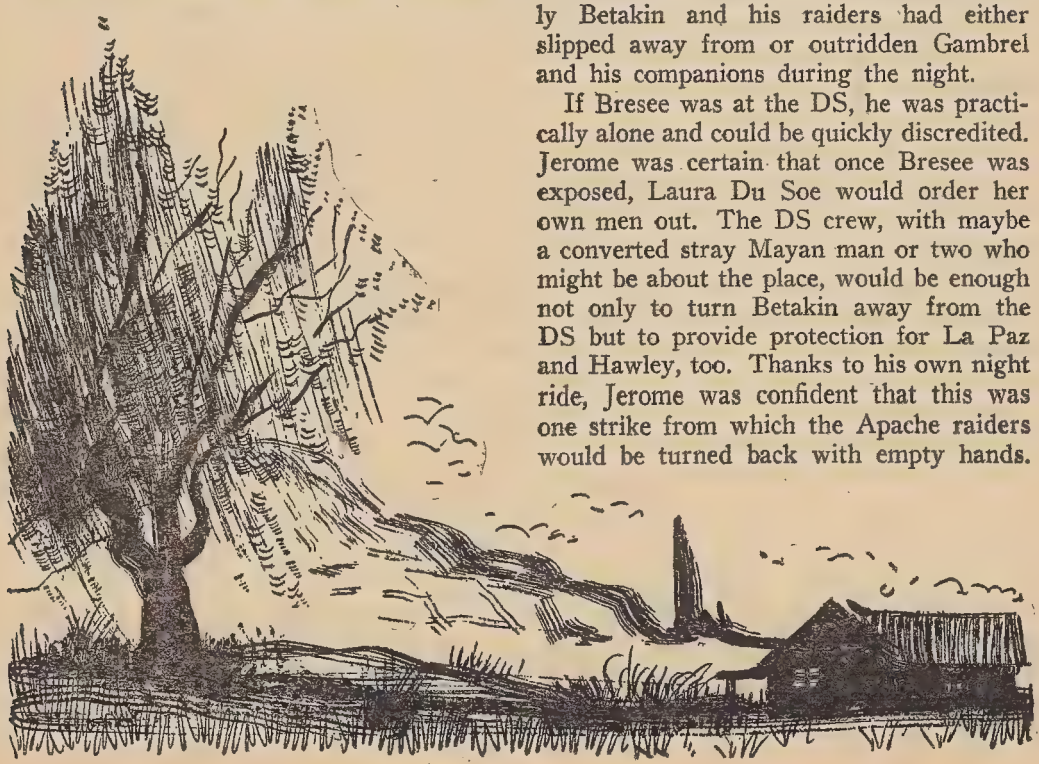
The girl nodded. Jerome reined about and rode down the slope, threading through thinning timber toward the open grass which lay green about the DS.

THE QUIET surrounding the Du Soe ranch was deceptive. Jerome was halfway across the wide strip of grass encircling the ranch yard, perhaps half a mile out from the pole fencing enclosing the home pasture, when a weird, thin, yipping sounded behind him, to his left. A curiously mild and inoffensive sound, taken by itself, like the racket of kids at a game. But it was a lethal sound for a man who had once seen Apaches ride in on a victim, who remembered their excited keening.

Jerome glanced over his shoulder. The Indians were piling up out of a cutbank wash where they had obviously been hiding. Most of the party, with Betakin at their head, were racing after Jerome. Three, however, detached themselves to hammer upslope toward the scrub timber he had just quitted. He thought of Micaela Ruiz, waiting there, and nearly turned back. But he could not. Her chances were not good as it was. She would have no chance at all if he led the whole Apache party back to her.

Besides, there was the obligation to warn Pablo La Paz and Hawley. According to Bresee's plan, the DS was in but token danger at worst. Since no ridden-out horses were in the DS corral and no Mayan men rode with the Apaches, it seemed likely Betakin and his raiders had either slipped away from or outridden Gambrel and his companions during the night.

If Bresee was at the DS, he was practically alone and could be quickly discredited. Jerome was certain that once Bresee was exposed, Laura Du Soe would order her own men out. The DS crew, with maybe a converted stray Mayan man or two who might be about the place, would be enough not only to turn Betakin away from the DS but to provide protection for La Paz and Hawley, too. Thanks to his own night ride, Jerome was confident that this was one strike from which the Apache raiders would be turned back with empty hands.



Flattening in his saddle, Jerome gave his attention to the weary horse under him, driving the animal to a last spurt which would carry him to the ranch ahead of the Indians at his back. He began to tense as he approached the pole barrier of the home meadow fence. He was too short of time to change direction in search of a gate or to pull up to lift down poles. He knew the horse was badly winded and he had no idea as to the animal's ability in a jump. The best he could do was to give it every chance he could.

In the last few yards he consciously synchronized the rhythm of his body with that of the horse. Lowering his hands, he let the reins slacken. And when the animal reached out in the beginning of its jump, his knees clamped tightly, as though to lift the horse with them. The pony did everything it could, but the top rail was too high. Forelegs struck solidly. Hindquarters were even lower. The horse scrambled for a moment, the rail snapped, and horse and rider fell through the fence. Jerome was catapulted clear. He fell heavily, scrambled to his feet, and saw the pony, already recovered, dancing nervously away, head arched to one side to keep the trailing reins from underfoot.

Jerome looked back. Two of the Indians, on the best of the Apache horses, were well ahead of their companions, racing toward the breach in the fence. Dropping to one knee, Jerome cocked and fired both barrels of the trade pistol he had retained. He missed both shots with the unfamiliar and inaccurate weapon, but both slugs must have sung close. The Indians reined abruptly up to wait for their companions.

Wheeling, Jerome sprinted across the grass toward the DS buildings. With his first strides he heard the heavy booming of a Henry rifle on the ridge where he had left Micaela Ruiz. He didn't look in this direction, not wanting to know whether the girl or one of the Apaches who had ridden toward her had fired the shots. Horses were milling excitedly in the DS corral as he reached it, but the house itself remained silent, as though its occupants were still impossibly sleeping through the

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Coming up in the next issue

The Gunman and the Lady

Harrigan Had Broken With Old Deke, Who Was as Hard as Nails, and Yet When the Crisis Came He Was There Backing Him to the Limit

A Magazine-Length Novel

By WAYNE D. OVERHOLSER

turmoil beyond its windows. This silence worried him.

Betakin and his raiders opened fire from behind as Jerome scuttled across the yard from the corral to the familiar porch of the DS house. Rifle balls drove into the solid, square-timbered walls with sharp violence. He reached the door, tripped the wooden latch, and drove his shoulder against the door to force entry in case those within were actually yet asleep and the inner bar therefore in place. The door, fastened only with the outer latch, swung wide at his impact. The fact that the door was unlocked, although the house was silent, was his first warning that he had not found the situation he hoped for on the Du Soe ranch.

JEROME staggered into the front room under the momentum of his own charge. Someone quickly kicked the door shut behind him and dropped the bar into place across it. Hands came out on either side and seized Jerome's arms, pinioning him helplessly. Another hand snaked the empty trade pistol from his belt.

"Got his gun?" Cleve Bresee's voice asked in the darkness. "All right, get some blinds up."

Windows were uncovered. Light entered the room. Jerome stared at those facing him. Laura Du Soe sat across the room, staring at him with an intense fixity. Bresee stood near her. Ed Gambrel and those who had entered Betakin's camp with him were there, too. The Apaches had not outridden their white companions, after all. Two more Mayan men held Jerome's arms. The others were Laura's crew, obviously uncertain and troubled, but truculent enough in the looks they shot at him. Bresee glanced briefly out a window and spoke to Laura Du Soe.

"They've pulled up to palaver out there," he said. "That's like Apaches. We haven't showed our strength and they're puzzled. Let 'em stew. We'll leave the first move up to them—" Bresee smiled a little and indicated Jerome. "Well, my dear, do you need more proof of Gambrel's report on what our good neighbor was doing in the Coconinos? You saw him lead those red devils out there up to your front door!"

Laura Du Soe nodded dully, not taking her eyes from Jerome. He wrestled angrily with those holding him, realizing how smoothly Bresee was turning the presence of the Apaches to his own use. Nor did he miss the easy, patronizing familiarity with which Bresee spoke to the girl.

"Laura, listen! Gambrel hired the Apaches to come north. Betakin won't make the DS real trouble—not with Bresee here! But Pablo La Paz and Steve Hawley have got to be warned in a hurry. He'll move on them, next!"

Bresee's smile didn't change. "So now we're supposed to send help up the draws?" he asked. "Anything to cut down our strength here, eh, Jerome? Boys, we got some Indians to fight. Take our good neighbor into a back room and see he stays quiet."

Jerome was shouldered toward a door. Laura Du Soe made no protest. Anger at himself surged up in Jerome. He doubted he'd have a further chance to talk to her, now. This was a possibility he should have considered—that Gambrel might also beat him back to the Verde. Had he known Bresee's crew had returned in time to back up their boss, he would have by-passed the DS and ridden on to his other two former neighbors. There was little chance they could be warned of the impending Apache raid against them, now.

He remembered Micaela Ruiz had suggested hard-ridden horses could be concealed in the DS barn. If he had taken a moment to check there first, he could have worked the rest of this out differently. He had thought Laura would back him up. Flimsy as the hope was now, she was still his only chance. As he was shouldered through the doorway toward the back of the house, he broke one arm free, lashed his fist across into the face of the man holding his other arm, and whirled to face the girl sitting woodenly across the room from him.

"Laura, you've got to listen to me!" he cried.

The girl raised her eyes to his. He thought for an instant she might believe him, and he searched desperately against time for terse words to tell her what she needed to know. Before they shaped on his lips, a whisper of movement sounded behind him. A pistol barrel struck heavily across the crown of his head. His knees buckled and he fell heavily forward.

JEROME returned slowly to consciousness, struggling with throbbing pain in his head, a churning stomach, and an apparent inability to move. It cost great effort finally to shift one arm. He discovered he had not been tied. One hand explored his head, finding blood on the floor beneath it and a wide wound across his scalp. He thought he understood the lack of pinioning, then. His captors believed the brutal clubbing which had felled him had also permanently ended further trouble from him.

After this first movement and first thought he lay still for agonized moments, not at all sure they had not been right. However, his head began to clear a little and his nerves steadied. He rolled slowly over, got his knees under him. Using the wall for a support, he got to his feet. Working carefully, followed the wall around to the door. He listened there to the voices sounding beyond it. Frowning with concentration, he separated them, sorting out words until they became intelligible.

Bresee, all right, sounding angry. And Laura Du Soe, her voice low and quietly stubborn, so that it seemed to Jerome that for the first time in many months she sounded like her father. Henry Du Soe had always had a habit of talking on the quiet side of an argument—and usually winning.

"So you've sent your men and mine out to saddle up, now," the girl said. "What use is it, Cleve? The Indians pulled away from here two full hours ago. We can't do anything for Pablo La Paz or Mr. Hawley now!"

"We don't know where the Apaches were going when they pulled away from here," Bresee snapped in answer. "That was Jerome's claim, trying to cover up his bringing the red devils in here. We had to sit tight till we were sure all attack against us was over. Anybody who's fought Apaches will realize that, Laura!"

"I still can't believe Lance Jerome brought Apaches in here, no matter how angry he was with us—with me. He loved this country!"

"Sure. He loved you, too. That's why he wanted to see your hair at an Apache belt."

Jerome, tilted against the door for support because aware of movement in the yard beyond the house. Bresee's and Laura's combined crews must be bringing up horses. He knew he had only a moment in which to face the two beyond the door alone, but he knew equally well that he could not yet take a dozen steps, unsupported. Besides, the Apaches had ridden on from the DS. La Paz and Hawley would have been plowed under by now. Facing Bresee and Laura could accomplish nothing, now, even if he could manage it. Laura's voice sounded again.

"I'd never have believed I'd keep my men inside my own house when my neighbors were in danger, either, Cleve. Pablo and Mr. Hawley were my father's friends. They were our partners, to."

"I've been wondering when you'd think of that," Bresee answered. "We had to protect ourselves. Wouldn't do for those red devils to wipe out every stockholder in Mayan, and leave nobody owning what's going to be the biggest ranch in the territory."

THERE was a moment's pause. Laura's voice came thinly, completely devoid now of the stubborn timber which had reminded Jerome of her father.

"Their stock in the company—Pablo's and Hawley's—reverts to us?"

"If they're dead and leave no heirs," Bresee agreed. "Didn't you read the contract?"

"Then Lance was right! It was Gambrel who brought the Apaches in here for you!"

"For us," Bresee corrected. "They

would have probably worked this far north on their own, sooner or later. We're impatient people, Laura. Why should we wait?"

"It's a terrible thing!" Laura murmured almost inaudibly. "A terrible country. We—we'll be suspected, sure. A thing like this can't be hidden!"

"Don't worry," Bresee said easily. "We'll look like the best of neighbors by sundown. That dirty-skinned Apache chief expects to collect a lot of money from

"Straight down the draw," he shouted to the girl

me at Horse Tail Pass on his way down off the benches. That's where we're heading, now. Instead of money, he's going to collect bullets. We got penned up at your house and couldn't get warnings to La Paz and Hawley, but we can sure collect a revenge for them from the retreating Apaches. Nobody'll believe we had anything to do with the Indians after that. Nobody'll question our ownership of the Mayan shares. We're going to be big people—Cleve and Laura Bresee."

"Yes," the girl said softly. "You get nothing out here without paying for it some way." Then, in a stronger voice, "I'm glad my father is dead—glad Lance Jerome is dead, too. I used to think they were the kind that would be remembered as big in this country."

Bresee laughed. Someone outside called.

"Ed's ready with the horses and the boys," Bresee said. "Let's go."

Footfalls crossed the outer room and left the house. Lance Jerome drew a long, unsteady breath and exhaled it slowly.

THERE was a bottle of whiskey on the condiment shelf of the zinc-lined flour cabinet in the DS kitchen, clean toweling in a drawer, and somebody's hat, close to the right size, on a peg behind the door. Taking a generous drink from the bottle, Jerome poured the rest of the whiskey into a basin, and filled it with water from a bucket on a corner stand. Bracing himself, he soused his torn head in this, flinching at the sting of the alcohol. Carefully parting his hair as best he could away from the split in his scalp, he folded a compress of toweling over the wound and pulled the hat on to hold it in place.

His head continued to ache, but he felt immensely better. A few minutes of searching netted him a good pistol, some shells, and old Henry Du Soe's own Winchester. He carried these to the corral, caught up one of the three horses remaining there, and cinched a badly weathered old saddle onto the animal.

Mounted, he looked for a moment toward the scrub-covered ridge where he had left Micaela Ruiz, but he remembered the shots he had heard from this direction as he was himself trying to beat the Apaches to the DS house. There had been enough of death on the benches. He could do nothing for the girl from below the Border, now. His business was with the living.

He pulled his horse about. Setting his teeth against the fresh pain movement caused in his head, he lifted his mount in a full lope toward a distant line of broken hills which sheltered Horse Tail Pass.

A man had to remember this had been Apache land in the beginning. He hated the Apaches for their brutality. He fought them, winning if he could, but he couldn't forget justice lay as much with the red raiders as with himself. And because this stubborn sense of justice clung to a fair man, he occasionally must ride against his own people.

Jerome tried to persuade himself that he was headed for Horse Tail Pass with the malice of revenge, to upset the plan Cleve Bresee had outlined to Laura Du Soe—to keep their party from whitewashing itself by apparently driving Betakin from the Verde benches. He tried to make himself believe he was doing this for Micaela Ruiz, who had died on a scrub ridge, waiting for a man who had said he would return, for Pablo La Paz and his numerous kids, and the lonely Englishman, Hawley, killed by a neighbor for his land. But he knew this was not so. Revenge meant nothing to those who were dead. How could there be peace after a war if this wasn't so? He was riding for the pass to save a party of hated Apache from annihilation if he could.

Maybe in part he was aware that if Bresee's trap worked, news of the ambush would stir other Apache bands to retaliation, visiting hardship on settlers a hundred miles away who knew nothing of the raid on the Verde. But even this was not sufficient reason. Betakin and his raiders were men. They had come into the Verde on a promise of guns and money, both of which they desperately needed. The death of La Paz and Hawley had been just in their minds because all settlers were their enemies. Micaela Ruiz had been an escaped prisoner, entitled to treatment as such. By their own patterns, the Apache had behaved honorably. Bresee had not. It was this Jerome knew he wanted to remedy.

HORSE TAIL PASS was really a wide saddle between low hills. An army could have moved through it in extended formation, except at one point. Here a hogback of wind-polished sandstone formed a barrier. An old stream-bed cut a narrow defile through this, less than a hundred yards long. Because of bad footing on the smooth stone on either side, all traffic through the pass had to traverse this defile. Jerome knew it was here that Bresee and Laura Du Soe would be waiting with their combined forces.

He made no foolish attempt to approach cautiously. The country was too open. From the summit of a rise overlooking the saddle of the pass, he saw he would not have time to circle far around and come in behind the defile. Out on the flats toward the upper benches, moving in almost military file, the Apache band was approaching. Betakin was moving his party more rapidly than Jerome had anticipated. In fact, the close-bunched formation had every appearance of an orderly retreat.

This impression was heightened by a puff of dust some distance behind the Indians, apparently raised by a smaller party trailing the raiders. Jerome watched in puzzlement for a moment, unable to identify the second party or determine if it was actually the cause of Betakin's hurry. He finally shrugged. The situation did not alter his own problem. Betakin was heading straight into Bresee's trap, and in this open country there was only one way to warn the Indians in time. Making sure his borrowed pistol and the magazine of Henry Du Soe's Winchester were fully loaded, Jerome spurred down the slope, cutting at an angle toward the mouth of the defile at a lope which would bring him into it a little ahead of the Apaches.

For several moments he was not sighted by the Indians. Their attention seemed focused on the pass. When he was sighted, four veered off from the main party toward him. However, when his course became clear to them and it was obvious he would beat them into the pass, they swung back to rejoin their companions. Jerome watched the party trailing the Indians, trying again to identify those riding in it. But he finally gave up and turned his full attention to making the defile in time to draw fire or some other signal of their presence from the men waiting there. Betakin would need no more warning than this.

Tension mounted in Jerome as he neared

the mouth of the pass. He thought grimly of Bresee's boast to Laura Du Soe that they'd be mild heroes to the rest of the territory and therefore above suspicion of any connection with the Verde raid if they wiped out the retreating raiders here. Bresee had picked a wrong word to use. It was hard to know what made a hero, particularly in this country. There was much on a frontier which had to be done of necessity, unconsidered and in no way involving deliberate bravery. So much that in an easier and more orderly country might be regarded as evidence of startling courage was here merely routine living.

His tension had resolved itself into a kind of grim eagerness by the time he reached the mouth of the notch through Horse Tail Pass. Bresee's men revealed themselves on apparent order. Jerome heard his name sung out and men appeared suddenly among the rocks in both flanks. He thought he heard a woman's voice repeat his name shrilly, followed by frantic orders. Then Bresee's rifles began to speak. He swung his sights across a target and squeezed the trigger of the Winchester. The weapon slammed solidly against his shoulder. And somewhere behind him he heard the thin, chill yells of Apaches at hunt.

WITH the shouts of the Apaches, signifying they understood the trap toward which they were riding, Jerome's work was done. Dropping the rifle, he leaned low across the back of his horse and rode with every ounce of skill he possessed. The Apaches were closer behind him than he thought, for although Bresee's men were firing rapidly, little of the firing seemed directed at him. He understood this a moment later when a horseman appeared in the defile ahead of him, blocking his way.

Jerome recognized Ed Gambrel. His horse motionless, and the man was sighting his rifle. Jerome flung himself violently to the opposite side of his own horse an instant before Gambrel fired. The rifle's big slug smashed past Jerome with audible violence. Gambrel's horse, tortured by the heavy explosion almost in its ears, danced a little in protest. As the man steadied the animal for another shot, Jerome slid his borrowed pistol from his belt.

He knew no more of Gambrel than his reputation. But in this moment his hatred of Gambrel was a cold fury, completely divorced from the Mayan foreman's intent to kill him. Jerome fired the big pistol unhurriedly, continuing to work its action until the hammer fell on empty chambers and he was almost even with Gambrel.

The man flinched with Jerome's first shot. He dropped his rifle. He was hit at least once again. And as Jerome reined up to prevent a collision with the trembling Mayan horse, Gambrel tilted slowly and fell to the ground. Jerome stepped his own horse over the man's body and rode on through the defile. Firing behind him was dying down. As he emerged on the far side of the pass, he came face to face with a tense body of horsemen. Laura Du Soe was at their head. She spurred toward him.

"Lance, you crazy fool! Are you all right?"

Jerome nodded. White-faced, her voice unsteady with relief and self-condemnation, Henry Du Soe's daughter rode up beside him.

"When I recognized you, I suddenly saw what I was really doing here. I knew all you'd tried to tell me about Cleve and his plan was true. I brought my boys out here. Cleve was furious."

"What's happening back there?" Jerome cut in.

The girl pointed.

Jerome pulled his winded horse around. The defection of the DS crew had apparently gravely damaged Bresee's position. And Betakin was a shrewd general. The moccasined feet of dismounted Apaches made quick work of the polished rock shoulders flanking the defile. Bresee's men were trapped on the lip of the cut, as Apaches scuttled over smooth stone to come in above and behind them. The Mayan crew was fighting frantically, but against elusive, vengeful targets.

"Why doesn't he retreat, back through

the cut toward the flats?" Jerome muttered.

"He can't," Laura answered. "There are more guns back there. More Apaches, I suppose."

Jerome thought of the unknown second party he had seen following Betakin's force. Certainly not more Indians. He tried again to guess their identity and failed, losing the thought as he watched the rocks above the pass more closely. He spotted Betakin. The Apache raised his lance in a signal. The Indians on both sides of the cut made a concerted rush at Bresee and his trapped men. Steel winked and guns snapped.

THE MAYAN crew had no chance. Bresee finally rose and tried to run across treacherously smooth stone in his boots. He had not taken three strides when Betakin's lance-arm stroked like the strike of a snake. Bresee clutched at the short, heavy lance suddenly protruding from his back, and then toppled over onto the weapon. The Apache chief crossed swiftly to him, lifted a loose stone the size of a melon, and crushed Bresee's head with it.

Laura Du Soe cried out softly and lowered her head.

"Something to remember," Jerome said dispassionately. "Never worry about losing your hair to an Apache. They can do without trinkets for their belts. They'd rather be sure an enemy is dead than wear his hair. They make sure every chance they get—like that."

Other Apaches lifted other rocks, then dropped down the precipitous walls into the defile. In a moment the stone shoulders of the pass were bare of any but the bodies of Bresee and his crew. Presently the Apaches filed out of the notch again, mounted, many of them proudly carrying newly acquired weapons. Betakin turned them southward, giving Jerome and the DS crew a wide berth, content to do so since no hostile move was made against them.

Jerome turned grimly to Laura Du Soe. "Wish I really knew why you quit Bresee at the last minute," he said.

"I told you. When I saw you riding into the pass, with nothing to gain and your life to lose, Lance—"

Jerome interrupted her. "Sure you weren't remembering the contracts with Mayan—that all stock went to surviving stockholders and here was a way to get it all, Bresee's share, too?"

"You know me better than that, Lance!"

"Well enough to know I'll never be a neighbor of yours," Jerome agreed quietly. "At that, you likely won't get as far out of hand as Bresee. You might even build something out of Mayan that your dad would have liked seeing. I hope so, Laura. I thought a lot of Hank Du Soe."

"But not of me—not any more," the girl added. "I deserve that, Lance. But what about your ranch?"

"Gambrel burned the buildings. The land's mostly on homestead. When the time's run out, you can pre-empt it. I was building it up for you, anyway."

"Where are you going, Lance?"

A sudden bitterness surged up in Jerome. "East," he said. "Maybe east of the Rockies. Some place where a friend and a neighbor is worth more than his land."

He saw she had an answer for this, also. Jerome did not wait for it but turned his horse and rode back into the pass. Six men were grouped at the far end as though waiting for him when he emerged. He stared incredulously. Pablo La Paz and his oldest boy, Stephen Hawley and the three men who helped him work his stock. Hawley nodded blandly at the rocks above the pass.

"They do a good job up there, Jerome?" he asked. "Couldn't see much from here."

Jerome shook off his astonishment that these men were alive. He nodded. "Couldn't have done better."

"Miss Du Soe?" Pablo La Paz said.

"Backed down at the last minute. She's on the other side with her crew. Don't know as she'll be happy to see you. Ghosts are scarce in this country."

Hawley chuckled and La Paz grinned. "Let's go talk to the girl, Jerome," Hawley suggested. "You got an explanation coming and it looks like us folks on the bench got to take over Bresee's company."

Jerome shook his head.

"Don't blame you, for more reasons than one, Jerome," Hawley said. "Maybe you'll see what I mean by sunset. But Pablo and me have got to stay. His kids and the notes I owe. With Bresee out of the way, maybe Pablo and Miss Due Soe and I can make something decent out of the Mayan outfit, after all."

Jerome was aware the Englishman was deliberately stringing out the mystery of their appearance here, and their knowledge of the scheme Bresee had put into operation against them. He waited Hawley out stubbornly.

His former neighbor laughed openly. "You're bull-headed, Jerome, gritty as sand. Let's say I got a hunch about what was about to happen this morning. I went up to Pablo's place with my boys. The Apaches burned my buildings behind us, such as they were, and came up there. We were primed for them and stood them off. The chief wasn't expecting that, and he was smart. He called a truce and we had a palaver. He told us the whole story. He was afraid Bresee might try a switch on him here at the pass. If we'd trail him and give him a hand in case he had trouble here, he offered us a promise we'd have no more Apache trouble on the benches."

Jerome nodded. "Apaches'll keep that promise, too," he said.

"I think so," Hawley agreed. "That's why we accepted their offer. Where do you go now, Jerome?"

Lance amplified the answer he had given Laura Du Soe.

"I left a rifle over on a scrub ridge back of the DS," he said slowly. "I aim to pick it up, then head on east somewhere."

"Must think a lot of that rifle, boy," Hawley said. His eyes were kind. "Hope you find it. Good luck. 'Let us hear from you."

THERE was a dead Indian in the grass beyond the horses, and two more somewhere back in the brush. There was a Henry rifle leaning against the bole of a tree beside the little stream on the slope of the scrub ridge. There were gentle fingers cleansing the wound in his head with clear creek water. Jerome looked at the young face bent earnestly above him.

"You didn't tell La Paz and Hawley to keep this a surprise for me?" he asked.

"No. Only that you promised to be here by sunset, and I had to get back," Micaela Ruiz answered.

Jerome glanced at the body of the dead Indian lying across the grass. "Seeing what you did with that old Henry to the three Apaches that rode up here after you this morning, Betakin would never have had a chance to parley at Pablo's if you'd stayed there. No, it's all right, Micaela. You saved those people's lives. You must have been mighty sure I'd come back here."

The girl shook her head. "No, Lance," she said simply. "Not sure at all. When you left me you were riding to another woman's house. I could only hope."

"So we travel together, then?"

The girl nodded.

Jerome grinned. "I never knew a woman who wanted to move on, only ones who wanted to root down." He sat up and put his arm around this girl who had finished the job he had started, and returned here to wait for him. "I think I've needed you for a long time," he told her.

She smiled and turned her face up to his. He kissed her and spoke in her ear.

"Everybody's been asking me," he murmured. "Now you tell me. Where do we go from here?"

The girl raised her eyes to the sunset on the great red ridge which ran northward toward the immensity of the Kaibab and the canyons of the Colorado.

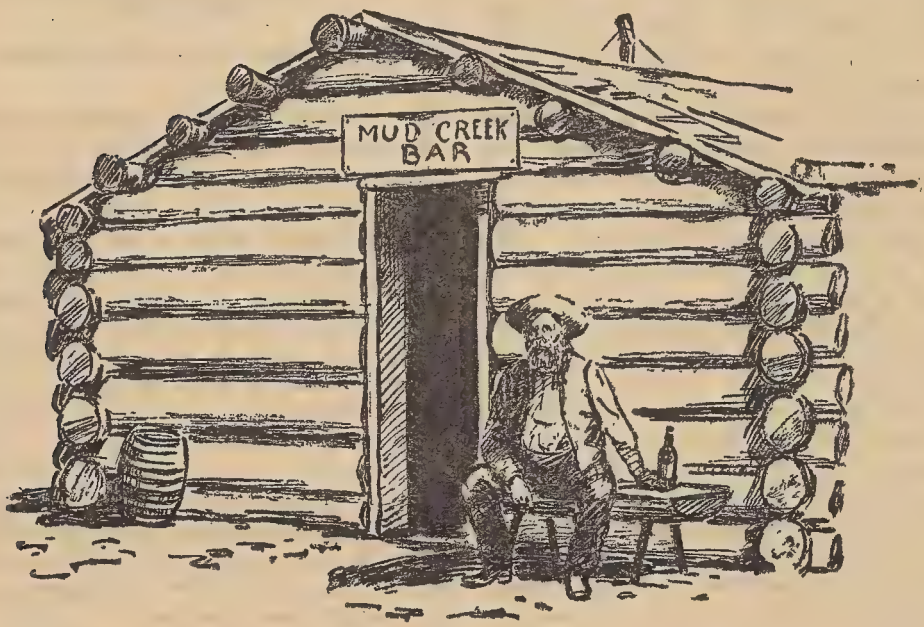
"Over those mountains," she said eagerly. "There must be much to see beyond them!"

This, also, was the frontier. A man did not turn back. When he moved, it was on westward. And if he was lucky, he took his own kind of woman with him as his wife.

He kissed Micaela Ruiz again, as the sun went down behind the red mountains to the west.

Johnny Stewart's Traveling Mine

By Ferris Weddle and Curtis Jondahl



A saloon and gambling den for the gold-dust-heavy miners

JOHNNY STEWART, placer miner, stood alone that night, untouched by the soothing rustle of spring's skirts. The breeze, carrying the pungent fragrance of bursting buds, was chillingly damp against his pallid face. Shaking with a physical and mental ague, he stumbled over the rough ground toward the clamoring voice of the Snake River. Perhaps in the dark green depths of the Snake there was the peace that had eluded him all his life . . .

He stood in the knee-deep grass on the bank, feeling the dampness penetrate his worn trousers. There she was, the silver sheen of the Snake. His shaking, clammy hands went to his feverish face. Choked words came from his lips, the half-prayers of a man who had never learned to pray. He knew then that he could not do it. He was a coward; he was afraid to die. Or perhaps, in this moment, a flicker of hope arose, for always the Snake River was able

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Like a temperamental goddess, the Snake River gave and withheld at will

to excite a spark of hope within him.

Swaying, he stared across the ripple-dappled river, scenes of the past winging through his disorganized thoughts in a patchwork nightmare of headiness and desperation. He fancied that the Snake was mocking him, laughing at him in a monotonous rumble, chiding him with monstrous amusement. *I gave you gold, Johnny,* it said, *but you are like all the others. You think that gold makes you king of all, but you are wrong. Only softens you so that you can be sucked into the shadows and destroyed. You had your chance, Johnny.*

True, he'd had his chance. A year before he had been a rich man; a strong man, too, who could walk straighter than most men of forty-five. The Snake River had brought him his treasure in the form of a huge sand and mud bar near the mouth of Mud Creek where it empties into the Snake. All over Idaho men where feverishly extracting color from the earth, but none of them had it as easy as Johnny Stewart.

He'd done pretty well for himself in the Dry Creek diggings, too, before he had moved to the Mud Creek Bar in 1875. At least he'd had enough grubstake money to hire several men to build and operate sluice boxes, for the bar promised well. But he was not prepared for that first cleanup which revealed the bar to be richer than his dreams.

SOMETHING happened to Johnny Stewart then; the thrill of exultance flamed through his body like a pitch-pine blaze. His eyes gleamed, and in a gesture of ecstasy he threw a salute to the Snake River. The voice of the river was sweet music in his ears. In this moment he forgot the trickery which lay beneath the turgid waters.

He built two cabins near where the old Oregon Trail and the freight road crossed Mud Creek. One of these cabins became a saloon and gambling den for all the thirsty, golddust-heavy miners who wandered by. Here Johnny Stewart became king of a one-man town. Here he bet his dust recklessly and burned his mouth with the strongest and best liquor available.

He squatted in the damp mud

For wouldn't the Snake replenish his mud bar, little by little, night and day? He'd smile in hazy contemplation and buy drinks for anyone who wanted them.

Then Johnny killed a man and buried him in an unmarked grave on the hillside. An accident, the miners said. Maybe it was. Only Johnny Stewart knew, and as long as he had liquor to deaden his senses he wasn't talking and his conscience did not bother him. He hardly noticed that the bar was disappearing until late in the fall when he directed the operation which scraped the last flakes of color from it. But he was not unduly alarmed for he had several pokes of pure gold. Now he could devote the winter to the serious business of drinking and gambling.

Something happened to that dust. Perhaps the card sharps were a little too smart for Johnny's whiskey-deadened brain. Came the day when he couldn't ante, and he felt the first breath of fear. He became morose and watched his liquor supply with reddened, jealous eyes. He asked the friends he had set 'em up for to return the favor. Most of them did not hear him; and through a haze he saw them leaving, one by one.

Winter dragged by, and Johnny faced the long nights alone.

Now, spring again. He glanced toward the mud bar and saw nothing except the water that lapped at the grassy banks.

Weakened from hunger and exposure, his thoughts a whirling mass of unreasoning fear, Johnny Stewart collapsed across his dirty cot.

He did not know how long he slept in a semistate of coma, but when he awoke the sun was shining and some bird was singing outside the cobwebby windows of the cabin. Weakly he stumbled from the cabin, a strange animation quivering through him.

DURING the time he had slept the Snake had receded and there was the mud bar again, smooth and untouched by man. Abruptly his great weariness seemed to disappear, and he half ran to the cabin to get a shovel and pan. He squatted in the damp mud and sand and stared at the flakes in the bottom of the pan. Incoherent words came from his mouth. The deposit was even richer than the first one!

Once again the one-man town boomed, and Johnny Stewart rode the giddy crest.

A new man entered the scene this time, one Capt. Jack. No one knew Capt. Jack's last name nor cared to ask, for the man was more than handy with the pair of derringers he wore and used with unusual dexterity. With his eye on Mud Creek Bar, Capt. Jack became the close friend which Johnny Stewart had never had, waiting for a chance to take over the fabulous gold mine that came in every spring.

He got his chance when Johnny Stewart killed another man and buried him alongside the markless grave of his previous victim. The Justice of the Peace of the little trading post and stage station of Rock Creek insisted that Johnny be tried for murder.

"You're going to come out of this all right, Johnny," Capt. Jack assured him. "But just to be on the safe side, you better turn that claim over to me so I can protect your interests."

Johnny Stewart blurted his thanks and signed the claim over to Capt. Jack, not knowing that his own shaken testimony would convict him of first-degree murder.

After the trial Capt. Jack and some of his men were to escort the prisoner to Silver City. Back in the brush off the lonely road, a saddled horse waited for the man who was to hang for murder.

"There's food and water in the packs and a bedroll behind the cantle," Capt Jack said. "Head the animal for the Black Hills. There's a big strike up there. Change your name. People are too busy hunting gold to ask questions. And good luck."

"But my claim, Captain!"

Capt. Jack laughed. "My claim, Stewart," he said. "Oh, you can stay here, all right, but a hemp rope doesn't exactly feel like silk about a man's neck, I'm told. I'm giving you a chance. Are you gonna take it?"

"Shore, Captain, shore. I—thanks," Stewart mumbled. "But you'll keep in touch with me, won't you, and let me know how my claim does? You'll send me a cut?"

Capt. Jack patted the trembling man's shoulders. "Of course, Stewart. You can trust me to do right by you. Good luck."

Johnny Stewart knew then, but with the terror of a hangnoose shadowing him he had no choice. He left.

Capt. Jack took over the Mud Bar claim and patiently waited for the Snake to deposit its golden treasure. But the tricky Snake merely deposited a bank of mud and sand. A while later the two-gun Captain

"You'll send me a cut?"

was killed by a well-liked and respected old man by the name of Billy Maynard, and his body was placed alongside the two victims of Johnny Stewart's crazed actions.

Johnny Stewart would like to have heard of this. Perhaps he would have mumbled something about the Snake being *his* river. But somewhere in the Dakota badlands Johnny Stewart died from the arrows of a Sioux warparty.

You Can Rest

WES McCULLOUGH would find no rest until he'd settled accounts with the beautiful vixen who had betrayed him

The girl beside him pressed another loaded gun into his hand

in Cheyenne

By CLIFTON ADAMS

THE COOL spring months had followed upon the heels of a dry winter, but that year the rains that usually swelled rivers and rushed flash-floods across the country in the great arroyos did not come.

The river streams dwindled to trickles and died.

The dazzling, cloudless skies stretched northward across Texas, Indian Territory, and into Kansas. It was a time when great cattle drives should be marching toward the Kansas railheads; but prairie dogs built their red mounds across the Ellsworth Trail, and coyotes and buffalo sauntered across it as they pleased and were undisturbed. Ranchers, big and small, sent scouts in search of new trails, but one after the other they returned, their stories always the same. There wasn't enough water between San Antonio and Ellsworth to make coffee. Then they got fresh horses and supplies and went out again.

It was on Wes McCullough's third trip that he headed west across the *Llano Estacado* and into the New Mexico country. There he found water along the western forks of the Canadian, and good grazing land northward toward the Colorado country. There was everything a cattle trail needed, except the most important thing of all—a market at the end of it.

It was hopeless, but no more hopeless than the desert that lay along the Kansas Trail. McCullough pushed northward to the Arkansas, and it was there that he met the cavalry troop coming down from Cheyenne. The soldiers were battle-ragged and glad to be heading away from the Indian country. The captain, a grizzled little man with his shoulder bandaged from an arrow wound, grudgingly offered McCullough a plate of sowbelly and beans in exchange for news of the civilized world.

"I don't know anything about cattle," the captain said after he had listened. "But you'll never get a herd east to Kansas unless you bring your own water."

It was an old story, and McCullough was too used to disappointment now to let it show.

The captain spoke around a mouthful of beans. "You could take cattle north, though, all the way to Cheyenne, if you don't mind a few redskins. You won't find a market like Kansas, but you'll be able to sell three or four thousand head to the Indian agencies there."

McCullough stared while the captain chewed absently, unaware of the tremendous importance of his words. McCullough said tighly, "Do you mean there's a market for cattle in Cheyenne?"

The little man looked at him. "Indians have to eat the same as anybody else. If they don't get meat they break out of their reservations and go on the warpath." He rubbed his wounded shoulder.

Three or four thousand head. It wasn't much, but it would be enough to save the cattlemen in the Valle del Sol where Wes McCollough had his ranch. He gulped his beans.

"If there is any market in Cheyenne," he said gravely, "you have just saved a dozen Texas ranchers from bankruptcy, Captain. We'll be able to build up a herd, taking cattle from all the ranches instead of just one. It'll tide us over until the main Kansas trail is open again."

The captain nodded, not caring much one way or the other.

THE WAY southward toward the Valle del Sol was long, but Wes McCullough traveled swiftly, relieving his pack horse of all equipment that was not absolutely necessary. He reached the Valley of the Sun, as the Mexicans had named the great grazing land, and headed east toward the town of Nardo.

Matt Chumly, the livery-stable owner, was the first man to ask the question. "Are you sure, Wes? Is there really a market in Cheyenne?"

"The Army captain didn't have any call to lie about it," Wes McCullough said as he swung wearily down from his horse. "There's a market there, all right, for maybe four thousand head of cattle." He turned his animals over to the liveryman and washed his face in the watering trough. He stood up wiping his face on the sleeve of his shirt. "Has anything happened in Nardo since I've been away, Matt?"

The liveryman thought. "No, I guess not." Then he grinned. "Oh, you mean Miss Valerie?"

"I don't mean anybody," McCullough said, but he felt his face warming. Other men had Valerie Castle in their blood, but Wes had promised himself that it wouldn't happen to him again. He turned on his heel and headed for the Nardo Saloon.

Josha Castle was a giant of a man, and he had a giant's way of doing things. Twenty years ago he had moved into the Valle del Sol, claiming it as his own. He had fought for the land, and he had raised cattle on it when other ranchers had said it was impossible. He tolerated the small ranchers that had settled on the fringe of his holdings—possibly because they amused him, not because he liked them. Josha Castle had only three loves: his drink, his food, and his daughter.

As Wes McCullough pushed through the batwings the big man was in his place, a platter before him piled high with a dozen cans of oysters and a gallon pitcher of Mexican beer at his elbow. Wes walked past him without speaking, for Castle had made it plain long ago that he wanted nothing to do with the other ranchers in the valley.

The bartender was a small, dry-faced man who had seen a lot of scouts come and go in the past months and their stories no longer interested him. He slid a bottle down the bar toward Wes.

Wes poured a drink and downed it. "Any of the ranchers been in today?"

"All of them," the bartender said. "Castle's makin' up a herd to go north. The other ranchers are havin' a meetin' to decide if they want to try it too."

Wes set his glass down. "Are they crazy? A trail herd to Kansas wouldn't stand a chance."

"What are they goin' to do?"

Wes said, "We can take a herd to Cheyenne, made up of cattle from all over the valley." The bartender's mouth dropped open. "There's a market in Cheyenne," Wes went on. "I got it from an Army captain who had just come from there."

The remoteness went from the bartender's face. He was suddenly interested. Then Wes heard a chair complain under a great weight, and he turned around. Josha Castle was leaning on his elbows, grinning. The big man also was interested.

THE WORD of Wes's find spread like grass fire. By two's and three's the ranchers came into the saloon to question him, and for the first time in months there was hope in their eyes.

Wes took his .44 and scratched a rough chart on the bar. "The way I see it," he said, "we'll have to drive across the *Llano Estacado* as far as the north fork of the Pecos. From there we can take the herd north to Las Ammas and on to Cheyenne. There might be some Indians after we cross the Arkansas, but most of them are on reservations."

"How many cattle will the government buy?" a rancher cut in.

"Maybe four thousand head," Wes said. "We'll build up a herd from all the outfits in the valley. That way every rancher can get enough out of it to keep him going until next roundup time."

For a moment the men were quiet, thinking about it. Then a voice spoke what was in their minds. "How do we know the market's really there? You didn't talk to

the Indian agent. We don't have contracts."

"I'm just taking the captain's word for it," Wes said evenly. "It'll be a gamble, but I figure it'll be better than sitting here and watching our cattle die."

Another rancher said, "There'd be more money if we could get our beef to Ellsworth."

Wes McCullough spoke patiently. "Every inch of the Ellsworth trail has been scouted. It's impossible to drive cattle where there's no water."

As if that had been a cue, every head turned toward Josha Castle. The big man had finished his oysters and was now cutting into a thick sirloin. He chewed thoughtfully for a moment, and then spoke without looking up. "I don't figure anything's impossible until it's been tried. If you men want to drive to Cheyenne to sell a few measly head of beef, that's all right with me." He laughed. "If there's anybody there that'll buy. Me, I figure to take the Castle herd to Ellsworth."

Wes McCullough could see what was going on in the ranchers' minds. If Castle thought he could get through to Ellsworth, then so could they. Why should they scrape along on the few dollars they would get in Cheyenne, when they could get real money for their beef in Kansas? Castle was ruining himself, and he would ruin them, too, if they followed him.

Bert Schuyler, an old-timer who had been in the valley almost as long as Castle, said, "I'm sorry, Wes. I guess I'll try for Ellsworth."

Hank Briton flicked uneasily at some dust on his battered Stetson. "Me too, Wes. Castle's never been wrong yet."

One after the other the ranchers dropped out, determined to follow Castle's judgment and try for the big money in Ellsworth. There were only three cattle owners left: Sol Jensen, who owned the Bar J spread next to Wes' outfit, Bob Sanders, and Jake Rodgers. The were all old-timers who had known Wes most of his life, and trusted his judgment even more than they did Castle's.

Wes stayed in the saloon after the others had gone. He leaned against the bar and watched Castle finish off the sirloin and wash it down with a fresh pitcher of beer.

Wes said, "Why are you doing it, Castle?"

The big man untied the napkin around his neck and wiped his mouth. "Why am I doing what?" he said finally.

"Trying to drive cattle to Kansas, when you know you can't make it," Wes said, "and talking the other ranchers into the scheme when you know it'll break them."

THE BIG MAN pushed back in his chair and smiled. "The trouble with you, McCullough, is you've got no guts. When the going gets rough you run the other way. That's the reason I own most of the valley, and you own a measly six-by-six spread."

Josha Castle was too big to be bothered by minor realities. He overlooked the fact that next to his own ranch, Wes McCullough owned the biggest spread in the valley. Wes moved over to the table and leaned on it. An idea was beginning to move around in his mind, and anger began to work in him as he remembered how Josha Castle had worked in the old days to get his holdings.

"It couldn't be that you *want* those ranchers to go broke, could it, Castle, so you could take up their land?"

Josha Castle's face burned in sudden anger, and his smile melted like wax in the sun. He got up slowly, and his hand dropped down beside the .44 on his hip. Wes stiffened. Josha Castle was an old man now. Wes didn't want to draw against him, but his anger had taken him too far to back down. He said tightly, "I'm asking you, Castle, not to touch that gun." Then a sudden, unrestrained laughter split the tension between them.

Wes wheeled around and saw Valerie Castle standing inside the batwings. Then he knew that she had never been far out of his thoughts no matter what he had told himself. She moved into the room, swaying her hips, still laughing.

"Honestly," she said, "you two look so silly. I don't think either of you has the nerve to shoot."

No other respectable woman would have walked into a saloon the way she had, but Valerie Castle wasn't like other women. Her mouth was full and red, she had hair the color of new copper, and eyes the bright blue of hard ice. While other women of her position wore satin skirts that trailed the ground, hers was made of buckskin and split for riding in the saddle like a man.

Josha Castle said gruffly, "Valley, get out of here. This is no place for a woman."

She smiled. "Of course, Dad. If you'll come with me."

The big man stood crouched for another instant. Then at last he stood up and breathed deeply, but anger was still in his eyes. "All right," he said finally, "but I won't be forgetting you, McCullough."

Valerie Castle turned to Wes. She seemed about to say something, but then changed her mind. Wes watched her turn and walk toward the doors again, slapping her thigh at each step with a leather quirt. Even after she had gone and the batwings had swung shut behind her, Wes imagined that he could still hear the sound of her laughter.

Maverick Maid From Mass.

By LIMERICK LUKE

A charming young lady from Boston
Wed a wild Texas cowboy from Austin.
Though she's happy as pie
'Neath that wide Texas sky,
Her family thinks she's a lost 'un!

WES McCULLOUGH had been only a kid when his father had moved into Josha Castle's Valle del Sol. Valerie Castle had been mixed up in his life ever since. Even when she had gone away to school in New Orleans, Wes had been aware of her. He had even waited for her, although he had never admitted it. Those years had been full of hard work, and after his father had died he had taken the place over for himself and had made it next to the biggest ranch in the valley. He had hoped that when Valerie got back from school that she would like it enough to make it her home.

But it didn't work out that way. Valerie was a Castle, and she wouldn't be satisfied with a man who had less than she had. Wes wasn't the only man to learn that. She had put her spell on all the younger ranchers, only to laugh at them when they tried to raise themselves from their positions beneath her. Wes McCullough knew the smart thing to do was to put her out of his mind.

Almost a week went by before he saw her again. Word had it that Josha Castle's herd was ready to trail north, and the other ranchers were working to have their own cattle ready to follow in the big man's wake. It was early in the morning, as Wes was seeing to the branding of the Jensen cattle, that she came along. He saw her up on the bluff overlooking the holding corral, her hair catching fire from the sun, her big black gelding standing motionless as something carved from a dark shadow. At last, against his common sense, he turned the work over to the segundo and rode up toward the bluff.

She seemed to be laughing silently as he rode up to her. She motioned down toward the corral.

"You have a good herd, Wes. Not many ranchers can get herds that size together."

He said, "I've got a thousand head. The rest belong to my trail partners."

She said, "We're starting the Castle herd north this morning."

Wes looked at her. "We?"

"I'm going along. You know I always could get my own way around the Castle house."

Wes knew, but she had never done anything as crazy as going on a trail drive before. Suddenly she said, "Wes, why don't you drive your cattle north to Ellsworth? You've got a big herd. You're having to leave a lot of beef behind just because you've got a crazy idea about going to Cheyenne." She looked at him in that straight way she had of looking at people when she liked them. If a man tried, he might be able to read things in a look like that. But Wes McCullough didn't try. Suddenly he knew why she had come here, and anger swelled in his throat.

He said tightly, "You can go back and tell your dad that it didn't work. I'm taking this herd to Cheyenne. Tell him there will be four ranchers who won't be too broke to defend themselves when he makes his try to take over the rest of the valley."

For a moment she looked at him dumbly. Then, quickly, the look went away, and anger took its place. She was no girl to counter with fancy words. Instead, she struck out with her leather quirt and slashed it across Wes's face. The big black reaided wildly as she jerked him around. Then she was gone.

Wes sat woodenly, feeling his face burn as if it had been raked with a running iron, but inside he was cold and frozen with rage. Down at the holding corral the men were looking up at him. The segundo cut his horse away from the others and rode up the slope to where Wes was still staring flatly at the dust raised by Valerie Castle's horse.

"Is there anything wrong, boss?" The segundo was a lank, pale-eyed man who knew everything about horses and cattle, but women weren't in his line. He glanced in the direction the girl had gone, then at the quirt mark on Wes's cheek. He shifted uncomfortably in his saddle. "The brandin's about done," he said uneasily. "Another day will see the end of it."

Wes McCullough didn't even hear him.

A WEEK behind the Castle herd, Wes started his own cattle west across the staked plains. The first few days he drove them hard, but the men had expected that. You always push a herd for the first few days to get them away from home ground and break them to the trail. But a week went by, they reached the east fork of the Pecos and headed north, and the scorching pace didn't let up. The riders became red-eyed and sore from long hours in the saddle. The remuda men were having trouble keeping the horses in shape to control nervous, trail-weary steers. It was their third week out, pushing up toward the Canadian, that the segundo came back from scouting the ground ahead and reported to his boss.

"There's good bedground about an hour ahead," the segundo said. He wiped his sweaty face on his sleeve, unscrewed the cap on his canteen and swallowed deeply. Above them the afternoon sun was still high. "We won't find a better place before sundown, and a little rest would do the men good. And the horses and cattle too, for that matter."

Wes McCullough stood up in his stirrups and looked back at the bawling, dusty herd. He had no intention of bedding the beasts down before dark. He said, "As long as the cattle are tired we don't have to worry about stampedes. As for the men, they signed up on this job to work. They can rest in Cheyenne."

The segundo wanted to say more, but his advice wasn't wanted. Dead-faced, he pulled his horse around and fell back from the point of the herd. Ordinarily, the boss was an easy man to work for, but since that day at the holding corral none of the riders could to anything to suit him. The segundo had heard stories about Valerie Castle, and the things she could do to men, and now he wondered....The boss still carried the red mark across his cheek from that quirt cut.

Up at his point position, Wes McCullough rode stiffly. He knew that the segundo had been right. The men needed rest, and so did the animals. But Wes McCullough was afraid to stop, afraid to relax until he was

so tired that he could fall asleep without dreaming. He told himself that it was all over now and there was no use thinking about it.

He supposed that it was because he had never given up hope that it had hit him so hard. Some day he would be big in the valley, as big as Josha Castle. When that day came it had been in the back of his mind that somehow she would be his wife.

He could forget all that now. She was Josha Castle's daughter, and she would never belong to any man. She had made that clear when she had tried to break him by persuading him to take his cattle over a waterless trail. If the segundo had guessed that Valerie Castle was somehow behind the way he was relentlessly pushing the herd, he was partly right. But Wes McCullough had another reason for wanting to get to Cheyenne as soon as he could.

After they crossed the Canadian, they began to move into the Indian country. Long weary days crawled by one after the other, and Wes began to wonder if he hadn't been pushing his men to their last notch of endurance for no reason. He searched the country carefully for a particular sign, but he found nothing. Then, one day, one of the riders that had been scouting the north country for bedgrounds rode over a rise, heading toward the point of the herd at breakneck speed.

WES KNEW that his hunch had been right. Josha Castle hadn't headed for Kansas, but had cut west and made for the Colorado country, hoping to exhaust the market in Cheyenne with his own herd and leave Wes and the other ranchers with no place to sell. Even before he could make out the rider's meaningless yells, Wes knew what he had to report. There was another herd on the trail.

The scout pulled his horse up beside Wes and wheeled the animal around in a spray of red dust. "Indians!" the scout shouted hoarsely. "Comanches, I think, but I'm not sure. They're attacking another trail herd three or four miles to the north. I didn't stay long enough for a good look, but it looked to me like Josha Castle's outfit."

Wes froze. Somehow, he hadn't been ready for that. The swing riders began to move up the herd to see what the trouble was. Wes cursed long and earnestly. In his mind he could see how it had happened —a party of Comanches demanding beef for the privilege of crossing their land, and Josha Castle, bull-headedly trying to put them back with a .44. Wes stood up in his stirrups and shouted at the segundo.

"Bring up the men from the drag. All of them!" He sent one of the swing riders back with instructions to leave the cook and remunda men to mill the herd until they got back. He moved fast, not daring to think. Valerie Castle was with that band of besieged men.

Wes McCullough forced his horse into the lead, with the segundo and the others following close behind. They raced across the country, the horses lathering and snorting under the pace.

They heard the yells and the shooting before there was anything to be seen. Wes drew his .44 and checked its loading blindly with his fingers. Then, as they topped a small rise which was the rim of a giant arroyo, he saw them. As they plunged down the side of the dry wash Wes judged that there must be thirty of more of the savages riding in a yelling, whooping wagonwheel, some with guns, but most had bows and arrows. Wes' riders let out blood-curdling yells of their own as they jumped their horses through the ring and made for the Castle outfit holding out in the center.

It was a hard, blind ride, and as they almost reached the small cluster of wagons which the Castle men had pulled up for a barricade, Wes saw his segundo pitch forward with an arrow quivering between his shoulders. Instinctively Wes lunged hard to one side, cutting the bit brutally in his horse's mouth and almost bringing him to the ground. He leaned far over and scooped the segundo into his arms before he left the saddle, and in a half a dozen leaps the horse had made it to the Castle wagons.

All the trouble had been for nothing. Wes saw that as soon as he dropped from his horse and stretched the segundo out. The

man's thin, tight face was already beginning to relax in death. Wes became aware of the gun in his hand. He dropped down behind a sourdough barrel that had been cut away from the chuckwagon, his .44 held steady. The gun bucked and roared in his hand, and he watched a brown-skinned body flail at the air and go crashing to the earth.

He fired until his gun was empty. Somewhere behind him he heard old Josha Castle bellowing bloody curses over the roar of his own .44. Wes stopped to reload, but somebody was pressing another loaded gun into his hand. He glanced up.

SHE SEEMED to have grown older, but not less beautiful. Her face was serious now, and there were lines of strain showing around her eyes. But there was no fear.

"Use this one. I'll reload for you," she said evenly.

He took the gun and turned to fire again.

The Castles had their chuckwagon, supply wagon, and two calf wagons jammed together to form a box-like fortress. Around the four sides the men knelt or crouched, firing with monotonous regularity.

A flaming arrow looped into the Castle fortress and thudded into one of the calf wagons. Almost immediately the fire began eating at the wagon sheet, coming to bright life in a small breeze and beginning to race over the canvas top. For an instant Wes stared, motionless. As long as they had their fortress of wagons they could fight a stand-off with the savages. But if their fortress burned...He leaped up to the wagon, feeling naked and vulnerable, and began tearing at the dry, burning canvas with his hands. He felt the wagon lurch, and another figure was beside him —a big, angry figure with tremendous hands ripping the wagon sheet off in one great swipe.

"I'll thank you to get the hell off this wagon, McCullough!" Josha Castle bellowed. "You'll learn some day that Castles can take care of themselves."

Wes felt hot anger sweep over him, but he had no time to put it into words. Another arrow slammed into the floorboards at his feet. He tried to push the big man aside, but then a tremendous fist crashed in his face and sent him sprawling off the wagon.

Then, as suddenly as it had started, it was over. The Comanches, feeling the extra guns that had been turned on them, turned and fled up the slope of the arroyo and made for the east.

Methodically, Wes checked the faces in the barricade. The segundo was the only man from his outfit who had been killed. One of his drag riders had an arrow cut across his cheek, but he was all right. The Castle outfit had lost two men. Another one had been hit in the leg, and one, with a shoulder wound, was groaning. Wes felt his anger drain out of him, knowing that something was wrong, and not knowing what it was.

He walked stiffly around the small enclosure. At last it was Valerie who showed him where to look. She completed a bandage on the wounded man's shoulder, being cool and professional about it to the end. But after she had finished, Wes watched her face go to pieces. She went over to the calf wagon, sagged against the wheel with her face in her arms, and her body began to shake silently. Up on the driver's seat of the wagon was Josha Castle, motionless, his big hands still clutching the arrow that had killed him.

The silence seemed endless. Slowly the men stood up and shifted from one foot to the other. The men of the Castle outfit stared at Wes, as if somehow blaming him for their boss' death. Wes went up beside Valerie and stood there awkwardly, not knowing what to say, afraid to touch her. Josha Castle's arm hung over the side of the wagon, and Wes took the big wrist in his hand. Suddenly, he leaped up to the driver's seat and turned the big man over. He pressed his ear to the big chest, near the place the arrow had gone in. The sound was so slight that for a moment Wes was afraid that he was imagining it—but it was there.

"Get me a knife," Wes barked over his

shoulder. "A sharp one. Heat it till it's red." He tore the big man's shirt away. The arrow had gone all the way through, leaving an ugly wound, but Wes hoped it was a clean one.

Somebody passed the knife up, heated to a shimmering cherry red. Wes McCullough went to work.

THAT NIGHT, as a coyote cried its lonesomeness to the moon, Wes sat inside the enclosure by the dying coals of a small campfire. Now he felt the awful tiredness that his riders had known before, but he could not sleep. He wondered vaguely if old Josha Castle would die. He wondered if the Comanches would come back, and if so, when. At last he heard Valerie Castle stir in the wagon where she sat beside her father, and she spoke softly to the night.

"He's awake, Wes. He wants to talk to you."

Wes got up stiffly, went to the wagon and climbed up to the bed. Josha Castle seemed to have shrunk in his pain—he didn't look so big now, lying with his face as pale as the moonlight.

The big man said weakly, "They tell me you saved my life, McCullough."

Wes said, "I guess it's even. You saved mine by knocking me off the wagon."

Castle's mouth moved in a hint of a grin. "You think I planned all this, don't you?" he whispered. "Fooling the ranchers by cutting off the Kansas trail to beat you to Cheyenne? Well, I didn't. I thought I could make it to Ellsworth. The best of men are wrong sometimes. My cattle were dying and I had to get them to water."

He thought he was dying—Josha Castle would never admit that he had been wrong if he hadn't thought it was time to clear his conscience. But he wouldn't die.

"I figured to cut across your trail and throw in with you on the Cheyenne herd," Castle went on determinedly. "I don't guess there is any herd now. Damned Comanches." He panted. "Do you believe me?"

If Castle hadn't thought he was on his deathbed Wes wouldn't have believed him. But he did now. After a moment Wes said, "I believe you."

The man closed his eyes, and then Wes found Valerie in his arms and he was trying clumsily to comfort her. Josha Castle opened his eyes again, slowly, as if even that were an effort. He looked at his daughter, and said, "Take care of her, McCullough. I still think you're a measly rancher with no guts. But take good care of her."

Josha Castle closed his eyes again, for what he thought was the last time. Wes put his ear to Castle's chest and listened. The big heart was still strong. For a while he sat there holding Valerie close, saying meaningless things that were meant to reassure her. But in Wes McCullough's mind he was thinking how wrong he had been. She hadn't tried to trick him, or break him. She had thought that a drive could be made to Ellsworth for the same reasons her father had, because she was bull-headed, because she was a Castle. He heard himself saying, "It's going to be all right. We'll rest here until he's strong enough to travel. My riders are tired, and so are the animals. We'll wait here and you'll see."

With a mighty effort, Josha Castle roused himself once more. "Like hell we'll wait here!" he sputtered in a hoarse whisper. "Not unless you want the Comanches on your tail again. We'll move out first thing in the morning. Tell your men they can rest in Cheyenne."

Then Castle went back to sleep, and the night felt cool and good, and the moonlight was very clear.

Coming up in the next issue

ARIZONA COWBOY **Preview News on Republic's Latest Western With the New Cowboy Star REX ALLEN Who, Believe It or Not, Hails From Arizona, in RANCH FLICKER TALK**

Gumbo Gumption

By CLIFF WALTERS

Riding like the wind, Hud closed in

IT HAD TAKEN a lot of patience to free the bogged-down steer from the gumbo mire in Alkali Creek, but at last the task had been accomplished.

Windy Brent, small, wiry and grizzled, was grumbling dourly.

"If anybody ketches me ridin' bog for the Garland and Chinault outfit another spring, they've hereby got my permission to rope me with a barbed-wire loop and drag me on my hip pockets acrost Cactus Flats. And don't set there flat on your saddle grinnin' at me, Hud. I mean it this time!"

"So you keep tellin' me, every spring," drawled John Hudspeth, six-one and a singletree wide across square shoulders. "What's the difference whose cattle you pull out of bogholes? One critter's about as heavy as another if they're the same age, and the grass is good, and the brands on 'em ain't too big."

"Brands big!" Windy growled at the younger waddie. "You're about as funny as that lit firecracker somebody tossed into my boot down at Rifleville last Fourth. Just because I've got gumption enough to make a change, you— But, nope! No change for big, handsome Hud! You landed at the Garland-Chinault outfit as a roustabout

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A MIRED COW was almost more important to Hud than love

when you was fourteen, eight long years ago. There you'll stay till you're back doin' chores in a wheelchair. All you can ever hope to get for it is forty a month and a smile from Beth Garland. That is, if she ain't too busy smilin' at handsome, dark-haired Ken Caylor or handsome, tow-headed Larry Sedgewick."

"Aw, forget about Beth," replied freckled, grey-eyed Hud.

"Yeah, don't you wish *you* could?" Windy goaded, swinging to his saddle. "Look! There goes Beth and her dad and Ken and Larry now, off to hunt horses over by Flagrock Butte. And look at them two Romeos crowdin' in on each side of her. I hope she never tries ridin' up Narrow Gulch, or all three of 'em will get squeezed to death. What happened to your grin, Hud boy? Do you wish you was out chasin' horses with Beth, that Ken and Larry was pullin' bog?"

"We'd better get on down the crick," Hud said. "There's several more bog holes between here and Rifleville."

The young man appeared to be watching the creek beside the trail, but he was glancing in the direction of a girl who sat slim and straight in her saddle, a blue-eyed girl whose laughter was like the riffles that sang through mountain canyons, and whose voice was as soft and low as a breeze in the pines.

"Wonder which one of 'em will take her to the dance tonight," Windy rattled on. "Guess maybe it's Larry Sedgewick's turn. Or maybe both her suitors'll be knockin' stirrups along with her on the way to town tonight. That's one thing that keeps me workin' here. I've got to see which one marries her and gets to be foreman of the JD. Whichever one it is, he'll pile plenty of work on big, stout, willin'-to-take-it John Hudspeth. They don't have none too much respect for you, Hud. But why should they? You're scared of 'em. Or just awed, maybe, by their he-handsomeness and their washin' ways with women."

"Aw, dry up," Hud mumbled. "And if either Ken or Larry's such a dasher, why don't they try sweepin' Doc Chinault's daughter Mirelle off her cute little feet? She's the most beautiful girl in the whole county—maybe the whole state."

"She's plumb beyond throwin' distance of their ropes, and both of 'em's smart enough to know it," Windy answered. "She'll marry a banker or a cattle king's son or the governor's son, but not just a cowpuncher. Beth's just sweet and pretty. Mirelle's red-headed and rich and gorgeous. When she drives down Main Street with one of her high-steppin' teams, any barber shop customer, young or old, will risk gettin' his throat cut by raisin' up in the chair to get a glimpse."

"I think Mirelle kinda likes *me*," Hud said, grinning.

"You!" Windy shouted. "If she does, it's just 'cause she likes horses, and you're about the size of one—if maybe not as smart!"

BUD CHUCKLED and rode on. He rather enjoyed Windy's blowing. Even when that blowing became a little raw and too penetrating for comfort, good-natured Hud didn't resent it too much. If Windy had a large oral cavity, he had a heart to match. And he had taught Hud a lot of cow savvy during these past years.

The two riders had reached the spot where Alkali flowed into Rifle Creek, a place two miles from town, when Hud suddenly stiffened in his saddle.

Dust was flying out there on that level terrain called Salt Sage Flat. Hud glimpsed a buckskin team of small, slender horses, running away with a shiny new rig that glinted in the morning sunlight. The puncher saw another glint—that of the driver's bright red hair.

"For gosh sake!" Windy bellowed. "That's Mirelle Chinault, and that locoed team of streakin' buckskins is tearin' loose!"

Hud didn't hear the rest. He had touched spurs to his big horse, Greyhawk. The fleet horse leaped, gathered speed and dashed away toward the careening buggy which, it seemed, would upset as it rocked over one salt sage bump after another.

Although Hud tipped the scales at nearly two hundred, he was a light rider. Even

a small horse could run fast under him. As for Greyhawk, Hud's own, he was a silver streak skimming away. He had to be to overtake those slim, hard-running buckskins that had circled the flat and were now hammering toward town. The frightened driver, who had lost one line, was yelling, "Whoa! Whoa!"

Hud was racing Greyhawk for all he was worth. The grim-jawed puncher knew what would happen if those runaway buckskins, thundering across the Rifle Creek bridge, tried to make the sharp turn on the road beyond. A light buggy would crash to the ground and roll over. Perhaps the most beautiful young lady in the county, the daughter of one of Hud's two bosses, would be killed.

Riding like the wind, Hud closed in. Somehow he managed to grab the fallen line. Then, crowding Greyhawk hard against the careening rig, he jerked the other line from Mirelle Chinault's grasp. He evened the lines, dallied them around the saddlehorn and began slowing Greyhawk down. When the rig halted it was only a hundred yards from the Rifle Creek bridge.

Lovely Mirelle, daughter of a French father and an Irish mother, moaned, "Hud! Hud! Good old Hud!"

Windy Brent came charging up on his sorrel. He slid from his saddle, grabbed the nervous, puffing buckskins by their bits and said, "You and your fancy teams—whether they're gentle or not! Darn you, Mirelle! Why don't you quit tryin' to show off? If Hud hadn't rode faster than an antelope bull-dogger you'd sure be a goner."

"Hud—bless him!" said Mirelle, and forced a dazzling smile that brought a blush to the leathery countenance of her rescuer. "How can I ever repay you for saving me, Mr. Hudspeth? Just name it and it's yours!"

"There's—there's nothin' I need, Miss Mirelle," Hud answered.

"That's right!" Windy cut in. "Hud's got a pocketknife and an extry sack of smokin' tobacco. But I'll tell you what you *can* do."

"What?" cried the shining-eyed girl eagerly.

"You can let him take you to the dance tonight," Windy stated.

"But I was just going to ask him to do that!" Mirelle cried. "I'll be so proud of him! You lead his horse to town, Windy, and let him drive these tough-mouthed brutes. Come on, Hud!"

Hud was in a daze, and he couldn't emerge from it—not with Mirelle chattering beside him, singing his praises. After he had unhitched the team and put them in Dr. Chinault's stable, he said, "Aw, listen, Miss Mirelle. I'm not much of a dancer. I don't want you feelin' that you have to go with me."

"I'll be expecting you at eight o'clock sharp!" she cried, and dashed on into the big house.

"Come on, my dazed dandy," Windy Brent said. "We're goin' over to the store and buy you some dress-up clothes. Then I'll lead you over to the barber shop. When I get through with you, you'll look like the gent modelin' range finery on page 36 of the Range Rider's Catalogue."

"Aw, shucks!" Hud groaned.

"Come on!" Windy commended. "This is the biggest day on your calendar. The day the over-growed caterpiller turns into a dazzlin' he-butterfly. Spread your bright-colored wings, Huddy boy. Come on!"

HUD WALLOWED in the mire of self-consciousness as, decked in his finery, he went into the JD ranch house for supper that evening. Windy pushed him through the door and said, "Now don't spill gravy on that fancy shirt, Hud. Maybe I'd better get you a tarpaulin to tuck under your chin."

"Well, what's all this?" asked old Tom Garland.

"Yeah, what *is* it?" demanded blond, soft-spoken Larry Sedgewick.

And lean, dark Ken Caylor was asking the same question with his eyes.

Windy said glibly, "Can't Hud go to the dance, same as you two, if he wants to?"

"Beth's goin' with *me!*" snapped Ken Caylor.

"She is not. She's goin' with me!" growled Larry Sedgewick; and it was obvious that rivalry which had long smouldered was about to break out into flame.

From the tidy kitchen adjoining the log-walled dining room, Beth called, "I'm going to ride to town with Dad in the buckboard, and get some supplies, so don't get impatient."

A plate of hot biscuits in one hand, a coffee pot in the other, Beth started through the kitchen door. She saw Hud bedecked in such clothes as he had never worn before. Beth stopped in her tracks, her blue eyes widening. She smiled, and spoke in a voice as soft as a breeze plucking the thongs of pine boughs.

"Why, Hud! What on earth has happened?"

"Don't let him scare you, Beth" Ken Caylor said harshly, "even if he's finally had his hair cut off so short you can see his shirt collar. And don't go to the dance with *him!*"

"Mr. Hudspeth's already engaged for the evenin'," said Windy, his voice very cool. "He's takin' the other boss' daughter to the dance this evening—Miss Mirelle Chinault, knowed far and wide for her charm and beauty."

"Mirelle Chinault?" Beth said in a low, awed tone.

"Windy's drunk!" Larry Sedgewick charged, coloring.

"I'll go to town now, too, if Tom and Beth'll let me ride with 'em," Windy interrupted.

"Sure you can," Tom Garland said, grinning. "And you'll be able to ride home from town better, too, in a buckboard than on a bronc. Well, well! I can't figger how anybody as shy as Hud ever got up nerve enough to ask Mirelle to go to the dance."

"She asked *him!*" Windy cut in, while Hud groped around blindly for something to say in his own behalf. "Why not? He's bigger and handsomer than Ken or Larry here, and he's a better cow-puncher than both or 'em put together."

Two chairs scraped back. Ken Caylor and Larry Sedgewick came to their feet. Both were looking daggers at Windy.

Hud finally spoke, "Set down, you two!"

"Yes, sit down!" said Beth quietly. "What business is it of yours if Hud has suddenly galloped up to the highest rim of Rifleville's social circle? We mustn't envy him. We must try to imitate him."

"Beth," said her father, "that don't sound just like you. What's the matter? Have Ken and Larry got your nerves on edge? Or do you wish that Hud had asked you to the dance?"

"I'll get some more butter," Beth said, and vanished into the kitchen again.

Windy chuckled. Ken Caylor looked at him and growled, "Stop your cacklin', you windbag, or I'll—"

"You'll what?" Hud asked.

There was no reply.

BETH, her father and Windy drove off to town in the buckboard as a full moon wheeled over the lip of Dead Tree Ridge. A few minutes later, sullen and silent, Larry Sedgewick mounted his bay horse and rode slowly toward town. In a short time, silent and sullen, Ken Caylor mounted his palomino horse and rode in the same direction.

That left Hud alone. He felt uncomfortable in his new clothes that had cost him too much money. He didn't want to go to the dance. He wished somebody else had rescued Mirelle Chinault this morning. He wished Windy hadn't butted in, hadn't rushed him into a social-whirl boghole like he was rushing a steer up the chute into a cattle car. Hud felt that he was overstepping himself, taking advantage of a grateful girl's generosity by presuming to take the belle of all the county to the ball. It made him feel like an ox in a silver-studded harness. And Beth hadn't taken to the idea, either, although Windy, darn him, hadn't explained *why* Mirelle had invited him to the dance.

Miserable as he sat on the door stoop of the bunkhouse, Hud looked at moonlight silvering the creek below. He remembered fishing along there with Beth, and their companionship before Ken Caylor and Larry Sedgewick had come to work at the JD.

Hud finally decided he wouldn't go to town. But Mirelle would be waiting for him. He would go to town and see her, tell her that he didn't feel like dancing tonight.

The sooner he got it over with, the better. Hud saddled his gentle black horse, Cricket, and headed reluctantly toward Rifleville. He rode over the divide and down the winding course of Alkali Creek, over the same trail that he and Windy had ridden this morning. He was down near the junction of Alkali and Rifle Creeks when his eyes, accustomed to the searching duties of a bog rider, fell upon a critter, a Whiteface cow, that was bogged down.

"Aw, golly!" Hud groaned, reining his horse off the trail and automatically reaching for his rope strap buckle.

The rider glanced down at his polished boots and gabardine pants. He had better ride back to the ranch and change. But it was eight long miles there and back.

Hud dismounted, wallowed out in the gumbo, looked the situation over and determined which would be the best angle to make the rope pull. Then he mounted again, tossed his loop over the cow's head, and eased Cricket against the rope strain.

The old black was a veteran at this business. Hoofs braced, he leaned his thousand pounds to the stiff pull. Hud dismounted, wallowed out in the gumbo again and, fishing the cow's tail out of the muck, lifted on it hard while Cricket pulled on the rope. The critter came loose and skidded on her side toward the grassy embankment.

Hud took the rope off, looked down at his clothes and said, "If I ain't a sight *now!*" Suddenly he grinned. He was glad that he was a sight, a horrible one. Now he had an excuse. Even his new hat had fallen into the mud.

WHEN Hud, mud-smeared but much happier, rode to the biggest home in Rifleville, he saw the Garland buckboard standing at the hitch-rack in front.

Doc Chinault and Tom Garland were coming out of the house to the buckboard near which Windy and Ken Caylor and Larry Sedgewick were grouped around Beth.

"Well, look at the mud-smeared wonder!" whooped Ken Caylor as Hud rode up. "I though he was goin' to take Miss Mirelle to the dance!"

"Yeah!" jeered Larry Sedgewick. "Wait till she sees him—"

Mirelle soon saw him. She came down the walk with a handsome young escort, Robert Earnshaw, the banker's son from Bison City. Mirelle cried, "Why, Hud, my rescuer! What on earth happened?"

"Had to stop up on Alkali and drag a critter outa the mud," replied Hud, grinning sheepishly. "I'm sorry, Miss Mirelle, but, well, I think you could talk Mr. Earnshaw into takin' you to the dance. You and him are pretty good friends, I know."

"Friends?" Mirelle cried. "Better than that, Hud. We're engaged! We have been for three whole hours. But Robert's a good sport. He was going to let you take me to that dance."

"And gladly," said Mr. Earnshaw. "You saved something very precious this morning. And I am very grateful to you!"

"Forget it," Hud mumbled, blushing.

"On the contrary, Hud," put in Doc Chinault, "we're going to remember it, and give you something to remember it by. The finest saddle and bridle in Ben Campbell's shop is yours."

"Aw," Hud mumbled, "you didn't have to do that."

"No, Hud," said Beth Garland softly, "and you didn't have to stop and pull that cow out of the mud. Dad and I and Windy saw her in there as we drove by. But we knew that Larry and Ken and you would be coming by on your saddle horses. We just wondered which one of you would stop and tend to a job that had to be done. But Mr. Sedgewick rode on by. And so did Mr. Caylor. They didn't want to get their fancy clothes muddy!"

"I didn't see that cow in the bog!" Ken Caylor declared hotly.

"Neither did I!" Larry Sedgewick shouted.

"Don't lie," said Beth coolly. "We all know now which of the JD punchers tends

to business. And Dad, who'll have to quit work soon, knows which one is going to be foreman of the outfit."

"Thanks for showin' some gumption today, Hud," drawled Tom Garland. "If you'd just asked Beth to the dance, instead of knockin' her off the Christmas tree by talkin' about takin' Mirelle—"

"Dad!" said Beth, embarrassed. She glanced at Hud.

"Well, wouldn't you like to go to that dance with him?" her father persisted, teasing her.

"Yes!" she declared. "But, darn him, he's so backward about—"

"Consider yourself waltzin' with me, Beth," Hud said, rashly.

Beth's blue eyes, just a little moist, were looking at Hud as—he just remembered—they had looked at him long before Caylor or Sedgewick had ever worked at the JD.

Glowing, Hud turned to Windy and said, "Thanks for promisin' this would be the biggest day on my calendar. It sure is!"

"Don't thank me," Windy answered, grinning. "Thank Mirelle's runaway buckskins and that old cow that wandered into the gumbo this evenin'." He chuckled and added, "Ain't it remarkable how kind dumb animals can be to men?"

KNOW YOUR WEST

1. Why are prairie dogs pretty scarce in most of the rangeland West today?

2. Which was admitted to the Union as a state first, Texas or California?

3. Identify this Southwestern state by these names of lakes or man-made reservoirs located within or upon its boundaries: Red, Dove, Soldier, Coolidge, Kinnikinick, Hay, Cow, Horse, Ashurst, Potato, Mormon, Roosevelt, Goldwater, Mead, Parker, San Carlos, and Colter.

4. What is meant by a lap-and-tap start in steer bulldogging?

5. This state was first explored about 1743, fur-traders established posts in it about 1834, part of it was included in the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, it became a Territory in 1868 and a state in 1890, it has a famous National Park, and was the first state of the Union to grant woman suffrage. Name it?

6. A gal named Mary got mad when she heard that the cowboy she was engaged to had been seen squeezin' Lizzie. Did she have just cause and why or why not?

7. Suppose you heard one cowboy tell another that he'd better jingle his spurs—what would he mean?

8. The cover of a recent issue of *The Cattleman* was an artist's conception of a Biblical patriarch, over the title: "The First Cattle Baron." Name, please?

9. The wild syringa is the state flower of what rugged Northwestern state?

10. Read these brands:

(a)

(b)

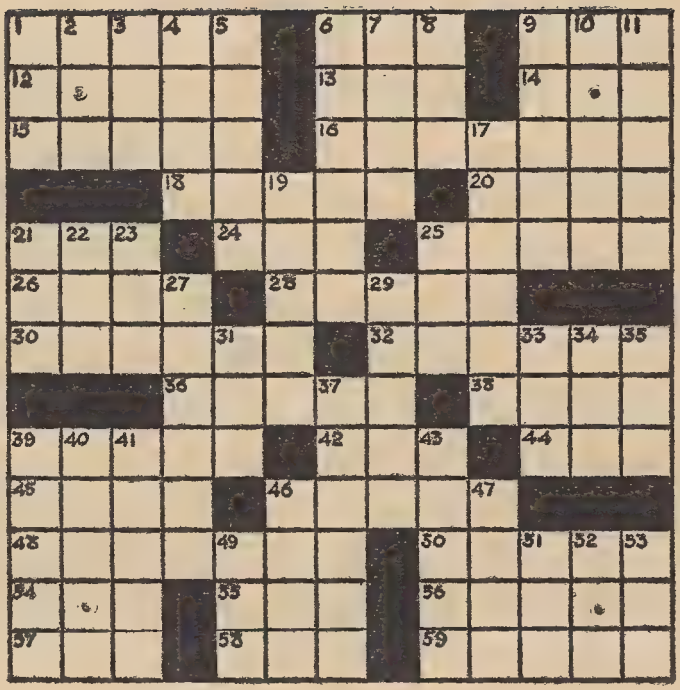
(c)

(d)

——*Rattlesnake Robert*

You will find the answers to these questions on page 77. Score yourself 2 points for each question you answer correctly. 20 is a perfect score. If your total is anywhere from 16 to 20, you're well acquainted with the customs and history of the cow-country. If your total score is anywhere from 8 to 14, you will have things to learn. If you're below 8, better get busy polishing up your knowledge of the West.

THE WESTERNERS' CROSSWORD PUZZLE



The solution to this puzzle will appear in the next issue

ACROSS

1. Cowboy's pardner
6. Likely
9. Exist
12. Edible bulb
13. Dove's cry
14. Pale
15. Opposite of credit
16. Cowboy
18. Smooth
20. Impel
21. Viper
24. Tear
25. Avarice
26. Jump
28. Western product
30. Lasso
32. Approached
36. Shell-fishes
38. Bee's home
39. Tremble
42. Belonging to us
44. Males
45. Stockings
46. Staff of life
48. Cattle thief
50. Honorable
54. Utilize
55. Highest note
56. Not cloudy
57. Wager
58. House addition
59. Fence of shrubs

Solution to the puzzle in the preceding issue

DOWN

1. Coal scuttle
2. Unit
3. Curved bone
4. Earth
5. Go into
6. Take
7. Pond
8. Pull by rope
9. Conscious
10. Cattle land
11. Finished
17. Shout of joy
19. View
21. The whole amount
22. Ocean
23. Equality
25. Command to horses
27. Fence-paling
29. Follow
31. Malt beverage
33. Margin
34. First woman
35. Lair
37. Western feed-bag
39. Bush
40. Place of residence
41. Item of property
43. ----- ROMANCES
46. Gong
47. Deal out sparingly
49. Civil War General
51. Flower plot
52. Loiter
53. Before

BOB SOUGHT a groom for an old maid, a corpus delicti, and twenty thousand wayward dollars

Rimrock

BOB WHITE had worked for old man Endicott for ten years, most of the time as a straw boss, and he knew all there was to be know about sheep. For a long time the old man had dangled the promise of a managership before him, and now he was telling Bob that the job was going to Henry Longson, his prospective son-in-law.

Longson hadn't been with the outfit a year, and the things he didn't know about sheep would have filled a library. But he had caught the eye of Evelyn and that made him solid with the old man, who had feared he might have an old maid daughter on his hands.

"I'm taking over the outfit of that Frenchman, DeGrass, down on the desert," Endicott said, "and I want you to go down there with Henry and trail 'em back. They're on the desert west of Welton, and by the time you get there the snow should be off enough to get them headed this way. Henry will go along to make the deal."

DeGrass was a range pirate whom other sheepman had tried for years to get rid of, by every means short of murder.

"Then you ain't really made the deal."

"You're going to show me where you hid Longson's body," Bob said. "Get goin'."

Ruling

By FRANK C. ROBERTSON

"Oh, yes, we've agreed on terms. It's just that he won't take a check and insists on being paid in cash. Henry will take the money down to him," Endicott said casually.

Had not Bob been a slow and steady-tempered man he would have thrown the job in the old man's face right there. Endicott was implying that Bob, who had worked faithfully for him for nearly ten years, was not to be trusted with a large sum of money, while this fly-by-night Longson was.

It was early spring. Endicott's half a dozen herds were still being fed hay, but it was a season when the crew had little to do. Bob found half a dozen men playing cards in the bunkhouse, Henry Longson among them.

"The old man tell you we were heading south in the morning?" Longson asked lazily.

"He told me we're heading south, but he didn't say when."

"We start in the morning. What about a pack outfit and grub?"

"There's plenty of pack-saddles, and we can get grub from the commissary, but I'll have all I can do shoeing horses for the trip."

Ignoring the suggestion that help would be appreciated Longson said,"While you're at it, nail shoes on my black."

Bob nodded, grim-lipped, and went out. He and Longson didn't like each other, and both knew it. They would be a week alone on the trail. It wasn't going to be fun. There was, however, no valid reason for refusing to shoe Longson's horse. The man had never learned to shoe a horse, and in fact, although a tall, powerful man, had never shown any great aptitude for any kind of manual labor.

AFTER supper that night Bob saddled up and rode four miles to the Delta post office. Mady Baker, the postmaster's daughter, was behind the delivery window. There was no one else present. She was a cute little redhead with no particular claim to beauty, but Bob found her irresistible.

She put her face into the opening of the cage to be kissed before a word was exchanged.

"I'll bet you do that to all the customers," he said, and kissed her again. "Don't the big mustaches of those Basque sheepherders tickle?"

"Unhuh," Mady said, as though suddenly reminded of a delightful experience. "Why weren't you in last night?"

"I was sulkin' in my tent, or more strictly speakin' the bunkhouse."

"Why?"

"I've just had my nose pushed out of joint."

"By whom?"

"Henry Longson."

"With Evelyn? That tickles me."

"With her old man, too. How do you think you'd like being a sheep widow?"

"I wouldn't like it. If I can't have a husband I'll continue to be a spinster lady."

"I was afraid of that, but it looks like it's what you're goin' to be. I told you we would take over at the ranch, but that's out. Longson is taking over the management and I'll continue to be a camp-jack range boss—if I'm anything at all on the outfit. I'll probably get to see you about once in a summer, as usual."

"Why?"

"Because he's marrying Evelyn."

"Aw, he wouldn't," the girl scoffed. "She's anyway twenty-five."

"You're twenty-seven."

"I'm twenty-one," she disputed.

"Oh, yes, you told me that six years ago. I'd forgotten."

"Why, I've reiterated it every year since. You're twenty-two, aren't you?"

"Nope, I've got to be twenty eight. Henry is twenty-three. There's only a year's more difference in their ages than there is in ours."

"But it's the wrong way around," Mady pointed out. "And Henry wouldn't marry Evelyn anyway. Why, he's practically engaged to me."

"Are you still declining to be a sheep widow?"

"Of course not, silly, but you don't

have to take orders from Henry Longson. We'll buy the Edlefson place and go on our own." She came from behind the partition and seated herself on his lap.

Bob said cautiously, "We ain't got money enough. I'm afraid to go so much in debt."

"How much have we got?"

"Five thousand. It's a lot to lose."

"How much more would we need to pay for the Edlefson place?"

"Twice that much."

"Maybe Henry would give that much to take Evelyn off his hands," she said hopefully.

"Then you could marry Henry and we wouldn't need the Edlefson place."

He gave her a rib-crushing squeeze and she kissed him. They were very much in love, those two.

The door opened and a couple of belated ranchers came in for their mail. They were grinning widely. They could have been looking through the window for quite some time.

A few minutes more and he might have told Mady to take their five thousand—money he had worked long and hard to save—and buy the Edlefson place even if it did mortgage their whole future. But he decided to wait until he returned from the desert. And then, whether he bought the place or not, he would quit Endicott, and he and Mady would be married.

FOUR DAYS OUT and Bob White was getting fed up with taking orders from Henry Longson and doing all the work. They were temperamentally built to clash.

This particular morning it was unusually cold, and there was a hint of storm in the air. Even though winter was on its last legs a snowstorm could be unpleasant, even disastrous. But it looked to Bob more like a dense winter fog than snow drifting in from the desert.

He built the fire from dry cedar assembled the night before. Then he called to Longson, "We've got to get out of here fast. Roll out and get the horses while I get breakfast."

"Aw, let me sleep," was the murmured response.

"Not this morning. If you want to eat you'll either cook or hunt horses, and you'll do it now."

Bob walked over and with a single jerk pulled the blankets completely off Longson. Enraged, Longson reached for the six-gun lying underneath the saddle that served as his pillow. As he brought the gun around Bob kicked, and the toe of his boot caught the back of Longson's hand. The gun flew ten feet away, and Longson clutched his hand with a yowl of pain.

Bob was unarmed at the moment, but he stood spraddle-legged, ready for the fight if Longson wanted to cary it through.

"Damn you, you broke my hand," Longson whined, eyes glinting with hate.

"Maybe so," Bob said, "but from now on you'll do your share of the work, or else."

"You've got your wires crossed, my friend," Longson said. "I'm in charge of this deal, and when we get back to the ranch you won't be working there any more."

"That suits me fine," Bob retorted. "I'll take my horse and head back."

"Now, wait a minute," Longson said. "Maybe I popped off too fast. I never could stand cold weather. I'll get the horses." He began hurriedly to dress. His teeth were chattering when he finished.

Bob went back to the fire and buckled on his gun. He still didn't trust Henry Longson. Longson was not unaware of the fact that Bob had never before buckled on his gunbelt before the camp was packed. The man dressed, picked up his bridle and went out for the horses, leaving his gun where it lay.

Ordinarily the horses didn't wander far away, but when Bob had breakfast ready Longson had not yet returned. Bob ate his flapjacks and bacon and drank his scalding hot coffee. The fog was beginning to roll in. It could be hard to find the animals if the fog got too heavy. He got his own bridle and went out to hunt.

He found the horses in a draw not a quarter of a mile away. It seemed odd

that Longson could have missed them. He saddled up and packed as much of the camp as he could. He kicked the embers together to keep the man's breakfast warm. Finally, with a disgusted snort, he packed up everything but the coffee pot.

THE FOG was as yet filling only the hollows, and a man didn't need to get lost. Their road lay straight ahead, through a canyon and over a pass. Longson had only to follow it to overtake him. He tied Longson's horse to a scrub cedar close to the fire and left it. The man's saddle and gun lay where Longson had left them. He hoped the man had brains enough to bring the coffee pot.

It was hard to imagine what was holding Longson up. Bob guessed that it was the sulks, and this made it easier to go off and leave him. He took one more look around the camp to see if he had left anything, but all he saw was an empty cartridge from his own gun. He had shot at a coyote the afternoon before but hadn't bothered to eject the empty shell until they made camp. He left the cartridge where it lay.

The old man had told him that DeGrass would not sell except for cash on the barrel-head. Bob knew that Longson must have the currency in a moneybelt which he knew the man wore strapped about his waist. Bob had no idea of the exact amount, but by putting two and two together he knew there must be somewhere between fifteen and twenty thousand dollars.

When noon came without any sign of Longson, Bob began to grow worried. The fog still persisted. It had settled down. What if someone else at the ranch had known about that money, and followed them? It would have been easy to knock Longson off while he was hunting horses without a gun.

He tried to think who might have known. Of the men at the ranch there was only one he wouldn't trust. That was a small, dark man named Sam Pruitt, who slunk about the ranch like a sheep-killing dog. Pruitt was a chronic snooper. He might have overheard some of the old man's conversations. But in spite of his unsavory character, Pruitt was the closest friend Henry Longson had among the men. In fact Bob recalled that Longson had recommended Sam Pruitt and the old man had sent for him.

He rode out of town with Bob just behind him

The only other suspicious persons Bob could think of were the two men who had come into the post office when he and Mady were talking. He couldn't remember just what he had said about the proposed trip, but it had been mentioned and the men might have overheard.

He waited a couple of hours, and when Longson still did not appear he picketed out the packhorses and rode back. This time he rode fast, but the short afternoon was well gone before he reached the camp. Had it been Henry Longson alone he might not have bothered even then, but he had tied a horse there, and he couldn't leave the animal to starve to death.

When he reached the camp the horse was gone. So were Longson's saddle and gun!

He made a wide circle around the camp,

"I couldn't say."

"But you did know he had the money?"

Bob hesitated a moment before answering. "I didn't see it, but I assumed he had."

"What makes you think he didn't just give you the dodge and slope off with the money?" Durkin asked.

Bob was startled. He hadn't thought of that possibility. But he said quickly, "He'd be a fool if he did. He was engaged to Evelyn Endicott, and she'll be the only heir."

"How come you didn't make a play for her?" Kessler asked with seeming innocence.

"You've seen her," Bob snapped. "That ought to be enough. She ain't my type."

Durkin said, "Unless he did run off with the money he's likely to be found dead, and that'll look plenty bad for somebody if the money happens to be gone."

"It won't be," Bob snapped back. But suddenly he wasn't so sure. He remembered Sam Pruitt.

"Well, I'm going out to where you saw him last and have a look," Durkin said. "This case smells of murder, and if Longson don't show up I'll want to ask you some more questions."

It was the first time the word murder had been used, but Bob knew it had been lurking in the minds of Kessler and Durkin for some time.

THE NEXT DAY Bob rode north, almost to where he had last seen Longson. The snow had all but disappeared. The ground had been bare when it fell, and the weather had turned off warm. He was about to make camp for the night when in crossing a ravine he suddenly came upon the tracks of three horses. From the looks of them they were not more than ten hours old.

He was up at dawn. He built a fire, and then began a search of the ground around the camp. He was about to give up when he glanced up and saw a piece of silk cloth clinging to a limb on a dead cedar tree. Someone going there for wood had snagged a neckerchief.

Everyone in that country wore silk neckerchiefs or bandannas during the winter. Usually they were black, white, or purple. But this piece of cloth was green, with a special sagebrush and cactus pattern he remembered very well. Sam Pruitt owned this fancy green bandanna. Near the tree Bob spotted a pocket knife, with the badly formed initial P scratched on the haft.

He no longer had any doubt. Pruitt had followed him and Longson from the ranch and seized the first opportunity to murder Longson for the money he carried in his belt.

He didn't waste any time getting back to Welton, but the days were short and it was dark before he arrived. There was a light in the post office, however, and he stopped there to ask for his mail. There was a letter from Mady. He stopped in the dimly lighted corridor to read it.

Dear Bob,

Received both your letters in the same mail. Thanks for the five thousand. I'll use it. It's too bad you lost Henry. If you hear from him first let me know where I can reach him. He and I could have such a wonderful time on your and Mr. Endicott's money. If I find him first I'll mail you back a magnolia blossom.

Mr. Edlefson happened to be in after his mail when your letter came, and I closed the deal with him pronto. But I'm still curious to know what changed your mind. You've always said you wouldn't go into debt for an iron raincoat if it was raining pitchforks.

I'm going to meet Edlefson tomorrow and sign the contracts. I assure you I won't be gypped—it's too bad you're going to be. Honestly and seriously, darling, I'm delighted. I'd about decided to become a sheep widow after all. Even that's preferable to being an old maid. Love and kisses, Mady.

BOB PUT his horses up in the livery stable and went directly to his hotel room. He sat down immediately to reread Mady's letter at leisure.

He was halfway through when his door was thrown open unexpectedly and Deputy Jim Durkin strode in, gun in hand. Behind him was Herman Kessler and two other men, all armed.

"Hey, what the devil?" Bob demanded. "Don't you ever knock on doors?" He started to get up.

"Just keep your seat," Durkin said. "Don't get up on our account."

Herman Kessler placed his back against the door. One of the special deputies searched Bob for weapons. His gun hung harmlessly on a bed post. Durkin reached over and plucked Mady's letter out of Bob's hand and read it aloud, despite Bob's protest.

"So you've bought you a ranch," he said triumphantly. "You who wouldn't go in debt for an iron raincoat if it was hailing pitchforks. Not a bit worried now as to how you'll pay for that ranch, are you?"

Bob noticed a look of grim satisfaction on the face of Herman Kessler. Already Kessler was seeing himself as the owner of the Edlefson ranch.

"What's this all about?" Bob demanded angrily.

"There's just one little thing we'd like to know from you," Durkin said. "Where did you hide Longson's body?"

Bob was about to tell about the green piece of silk and the knife in his pocket, but changed his mind. This was something he wanted to clear up himself.

"I've told you how I left him, or rather how he left me."

Durkin suddenly displayed an empty cartridge in his palm. Bob knew that it had come from his own gun. "We got this about where Henry Longson got his, looks like," he said. "Do you deny dropping it at your camp?"

"I reckon not. I shot at a coyote the day before."

"How come you didn't extract the empty then?"

"I just didn't bother till I made camp."

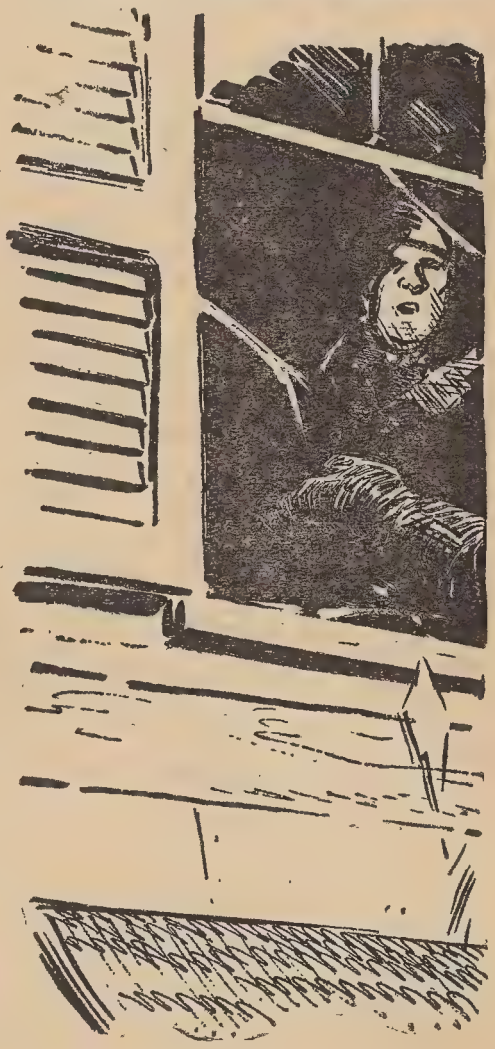
"But you didn't hit the coyote, did you? That is, unless you call Longson one."

Herman Kessler spoke up, "This is too bad, Bob, and I'm sorry, but you'd just as well come clean. We wired to Endicott and got word back that Longson was carrying twenty thousand dollars. And we found Longson's saddle in a crevice not a quarter of a mile from where you made camp."

"And the next time out we'll find the body," Durkin stated.

Bob stilled the rising panic within him. He was sure that Longson's body would be found, and there was really nothing to link Sam Pruitt with the crime—nothing compared to the evidence piling up against Bob. But Pruitt was still in the country.

Bob hurled himself through the

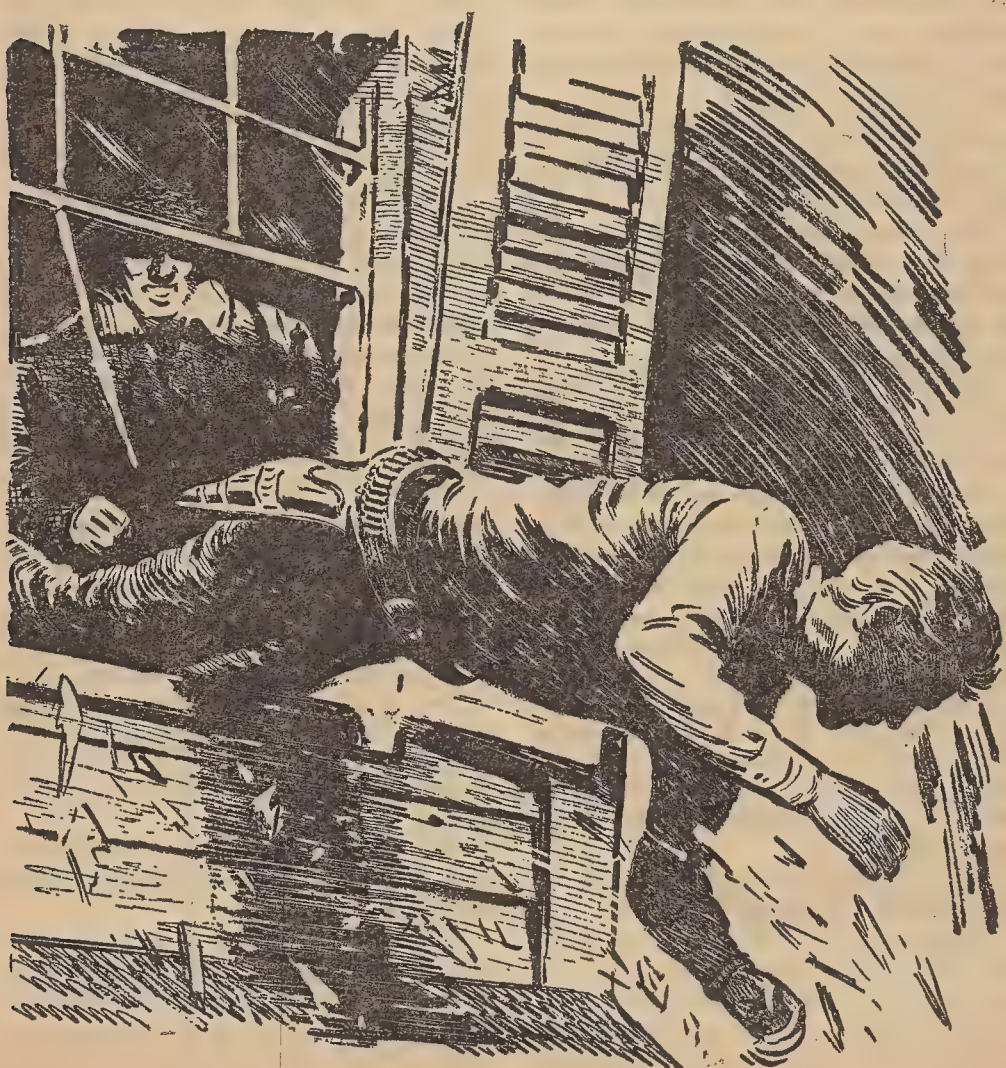


He must be, thanks to the blizzard that had trapped him.

Durkin and the others had holstered their guns, but they could use them in a hurry if he started anything. His only chance was to make a headlong lunge out the window. There was an awning below it to shade the south side of the hotel dining room, but whether it was up or down he didn't know. If it wasn't he'd have a twelve-foot drop to the ground.

The room was lighted by a single coal-oil lamp on the dresser. He stepped past Durkin toward the dresser, and then with a sudden movement swung and hooked his left arm around Durkin's neck, while with the other arm he swept the lamp to the floor, plunging the room into sudden darkness. He continued the sweep of his arm as his fingers tightened over the gun in Durkin's holster. He got it out and released Durkin as someone fired a shot.

window, depending on luck to turn him over as he dropped



The men were rushing to help Durkin. Bob threw the deputy against them, stepped aside, and hurled himself through the window head first, depending upon luck to turn him over as he dropped earthward.

THE WINDOW frame, old and weather-beaten, offered no more resistance than the flimsy glass. His descent was checked almost before it had begun. The awning was raised and he fell into it. Something ripped, but didn't give, and suddenly he found himself entangled.

He had the good sense to lie quietly, for immediately men were at the window firing recklessly at the shadows along the dark and silent street. The marksmen were not five feet above his head.

Durkin yelled, "Stop that shootin', you fools, and let's get out on the street and cut through the alleys. If we don't let him get a horse he can't get away."

Bob realized that his escape was cut off. Even if he dropped to the ground someone was sure to see him. He managed to get to his feet, and he drew himself back up into the room.

He glanced into the corridor, and found it empty. He could hear shouts and running feet on the board walks. Here and there lanterns flicked in the darkness.

Leaving the hotel was out of the question. He had to find a hiding-place in it. He tip-toed down the corridor and found a small room that seemed to be used for storage purposes. It was the best hiding-place he could hope to find, but he wasn't going to be comfortable.

Feeling confident he was the only person on that floor of the hotel, he returned to his own room. Here he had a command of the street, and could listen to the scraps of excited conversation that floated up to him.

"It's a wonder he didn't break a leg or something," he heard a man say.

"You reckon some of these sheps might hide him in their commissary wagons and haul him out of town?" another speculated.

"They might. These wool wranglers hang together like a lot of tangled shoelaces. But he's more likely to catch a rattler out of here tonight."

"Somebody ought to warn Durkin about that."

A new voice broke in. "Hell, Durkin knows all about that. He's fixin' a trap. He says give the guy all the chance in the world to catch the next freight, and he'll stop it a mile out of town and make a search."

Bob stepped into another room and made a light. Finding a scrap of paper he took a pencil from his pocket and wrote:

"Dear Deputy Durkin: I can't bear to leave you without a word of farewell and thanks. Your tip about catching a freight out of here was good, and I appreciate you stopping it a mile out of town so I can grab it and pull out after you've made your search. I remain your sincere departed friend, Bob White."

He left the letter on the dresser in his own room, then stripped a pair of blankets from it and went back to the storeroom. By striking a few matches he was able to enlarge a space between the wall and a large packing case and spread his blankets. He wasn't going to be too comfortable, but it would do until he could find an opportunity to grab a horse and get out of town.

BOB WAS half dozing in his cramped quarters when he heard voices in the corridor. A man yelled, "Hey, Durkin! I thought you said White took a dive out of the window."

"What about it?" came Durkin's voice.

The answer was a loud laugh. Bob heard half a dozen men come up the stairs. "If he did," the voice said, "he took time to write you a letter about it. Now he says he won't be back."

"Let me see that," Durkin howled, and for a few minutes the air was blue with his cursing.

It didn't take them long then to diagnose how Bob had gotten back into his room. But none of them stopped to think that he might still be in the hotel. The last Bob heard, Durkin was legging it for the depot

to wire a request that the train be stopped and searched.

It was nearly daylight before the talking died down, and Bob guessed there would still be somebody down in the office. It would be entirely too dangerous trying to get away. When he left he wanted more darkness than was available to him now. There was nothing for it but to remain hidden in the storage room during the day and hope no one would come near it.

Once a maid rattled the door, and came in looking for something. Bob made himself small, and scarcely breathed. She found what she wanted and went away. He was undisturbed the rest of the day, but he was getting hungry. He would have to get out of there pretty soon.

It had been dark an hour and the westbound passenger train had rolled in and rolled out when Bob heard Bennett open the door of the room next to the storage space.

"I'm sure you'll find this room quite comfortable," he heard Bennett say. "The room next to it is unoccupied, and there's a storage room on the other side, so even if the walls are a little thin you won't be disturbed."

Had he been on the rack, suffering the direst pain possible, Bob would have known the voice that replied, "I'll make out all right, thank you."

Unbelievable as it was, that was Mady's voice.

"We had quite some excitement here last night," Bennett informed the girl, "but it's all quiet now. There was a murderer in one of the rooms, but he slugged the deputy sheriff, shot up the town, and got away."

"You don't say!" Mady exclaimed. "Who was he?"

"Name of Bob White, but he was no quail," Bennett chuckled at his own humor. And then he launched into a description of Bob which painted him as one of the most reckless and murderous desperados who ever forked a horse or cocked a gun.

Bob waited for Mady to put in a word of defense in his behalf, but she only uttered little shocked expressions of amazement. Presently Bennett went away, and a minute or so later Bob opened the door of the room and stepped inside.

Mady, bending over a suitcase, whirled to face him.

"Bob!" Surprised as she was, the exclamation came in a whisper. Then they were locked in each other's arms.

"What're you doing here?" he whispered presently.

"I saw the telegrams that passed back and forth, and knew they claimed you had killed Henry Longson for his money. I thought I'd better get down here and see if I could help."

The post office was the end of the telephone line, and the telegrams were all phoned in there from the railroad station twenty miles away. Mady always knew what was in a message before the person it was intended for got it.

"Well, you can sure help," Bob said. "You'll have to go supperless tonight, my girl," Bob said. "And what's more you'll have to sit there and watch me enjoying mine. I haven't eaten since last night."

"That, I presume," Mady said, "is what might be called love. But I'll do it. While I'm gone, for heaven's sake wash your face and hands and comb your hair. You look like you had been sleeping in a rat's nest."

"I have," Bob said fervently.

WHEN Mady had gone to deliver the order, Bob made himself as presentable as possible. When the girl returned she was breathing rapidly, and her eyes gleamed with suppressed excitement.

She closed the door carefully, then said, "Who do you think I just saw down in the dining room? Sam Pruitt. What's he doing here?"

Her excitement became twice as intense when she saw how much her news excited Bob.

"Holy cow!" he exclaimed. "Pruitt is the guy I had to find. He killed Henry Longson."

"What?"

Hurriedly Bob told her about Long-

son's disappearance and the bit of silk and the pocket knife he had found.

"But how can you make him confess?" Mady wanted to know.

"I don't know, but if I ever get my hands on him I can make him take me to Longson's body, or I'll wear out the earth with him. I've got an idea."

Before he could tell her what it was they heard a waitress from the dining room bringing the food Mady had ordered. Bob had no choice but to roll under the bed until she was gone.

"I know you're hungry," he said, "but there's a Chinese restaurant that stays open till midnight. You can sneak a snack there."

Then, while he ate the sizzling steak and drank the steaming coffee, he divulged his plan.

When he had finished eating they twisted the two sheets on the bed together to make a rope. Bob used them to drop to the ground from her window. He signaled that everything was all right, and she drew the sheets back.

From now on it was largely up to Mady, but Bob felt certain she wouldn't fail. She had a most convincing way with men. He hid out behind the hotel for perhaps half an hour. Then Deputy Jim Durkin came out where he was.

"So you *are* here," the deputy grunted. "I thought maybe that girl was pulling my leg."

"She doesn't pull men's legs," Bob rejoined. "You trust her and you'll find your murderer."

"I don't know. It sounds pretty far-fetched, but I'll play along. But if this is another damned trick you'll pay for it. I'll leave two horses for you down behind that section-house." Durkin went away.

Almost another hour passed before Bob again heard voices. He steeled himself, trying to control his excitement. One of the voices was Mady's, the other Sam Pruitt's.

"I just had to talk to you, Sam," Mady was saying. "You're the only one I know here. You can't imagine how glad I was to see you."

"Yeah?" Pruitt sounded flattered.

"Nor me," Bob spoke from the shadows. "Don't move, Pruitt."

The man made a tentative move for his gun, but his hands went up when he saw the gun in Bob's hand. "What kind of a trick—"

"It's a trick, all right, and a good one," Bob interrupted. "You and me are taking a ride. You're going to show me where you hid Henry Longson's body, or you won't come back. Git going."

With a gun in his back Pruitt walked to where Durkin had left two horses. Bob disarmed the man and threw away the gun.

"You try any tricks at all, Pruitt, and I don't stop with just shooting you. I'll beat you half to death before I do. Lead out now, and don't look back."

MUTTERING curses, the little man mounted and rode out of town with Bob just behind him. Somewhere behind Bob was Deputy Durkin and, though Bob didn't know it, Mady Baker. By keeping the man from looking back, Bob thought he could keep Pruitt from knowing they were being followed. As they rode Bob told of having found Pruitt's camp, and the knife and the bit of silk from the green neckerchief Pruitt had lost.

At last Pruitt said, "Look, it's a long

way out there, and it's damned cold. I hid my outfit in a deserted shack down the tracks here. Let me stop and get my overcoat."

The demand seemed reasonable enough. "All right," Bob conceded, "but no tricks."

They stopped before the deserted shack. "You want me to go in, White, or will you do it?" Pruitt asked.

"You go. I'll be right behind you."

They both swung down, and Pruitt op-

ened the door of the shack. The instant Pruitt was inside he flung himself suddenly to one side, and yelled, "Kill him, Henry!"

Bob was already diving after Pruitt. He heard the report of a gun, saw the crimson flash, and felt hot lead sear along his back. But the shot had been too high to down him. He swerved suddenly and dived toward the spot the shot had come from. His arms closed about a man's legs above the ankles, and the man fell.

Bob swarmed over him, striking savagely with his gun barrel. Two more shots ripped through the roof of the shanty, and then one of Bob's wild blows found its mark across the bridge of the gunman's nose, and the man went limp.

It was only a minute or so before Durkin and Mady arrived. "Come out, whoever is in there," Durkin yelled. "This place is surrounded, and you can't get away."

Sam Pruitt came first, and then Bob emerged, dragging with him Henry Longson.

"Here's your damned dead man, Durkin," Bob said. "Search him and see if he ain't still carrying that twenty thousand."

Longson was. It didn't take long to get the whole story. Longson had never had any intention of going through with a marriage to Evelyn Endicott, if there was any other way to make a stake. The twenty thousand dollars Endicott had entrusted to him had looked big.

Longson had hit upon the idea of seemingly getting himself murdered. He had had Sam Pruitt follow with a pack outfit. He had watched the camp until Bob had gone on, leaving Longson's horse behind. He had hidden the saddle where it could be found, then joined Pruitt.

Had it not been for the blizzard which had delayed them, they would have gotten away with it. Unable to make up their minds what to do, they had lingered in the hills until they finally decided to take a chance on Pruitt's getting supplies in Welton, while Longson stayed hidden in the empty shack.

"This is the damnedest murder case I was ever mixed up in," Durkin confessed. "I still think there ought to be a corpse somewhere."

They rode back to town, where Bob sat proudly in a booth in the Chinese restaurant and watched Mady eat.

"Now I suppose you'll stay down here and trail Endicott's sheep back for him," Mady said.

"Not on your life. Durkin's got that money, and so far as I'm concerned he can keep it. We got a ranch, ain't we?"

"Of course. And you're through herding sheep for good?"

"I don't know," Bob said thoughtfully, but with a twinkle in his eye. "I've always heard that trailing one old biddy is harder work than a whole herd, but I'm game to try it."

"I'm not old," Mady denied. "I'm twenty-one."

Coming up in the next issue

SINFUL SIXGUNS

If You Ranch the Currycomb You Have to Be Hard Enough to Fight and to Love With Fierce Intensity—a Strong Novelette

By CHANDLER WHIPPLE

FEEL MY MUSCLES!

Tom Admitted Horseback Men Run to Muscle But Insisted to Miss Lillian Benson That He Had a Heart of Gold—a Short Story

By S. OMAR BARKER

GUN CRY

By H. A. DeROSSO

"Don't go away too soon, Len," she said to me urgently

LEN SETTLED AFFAIRS of vengeance with a gun. It was a different matter with affairs of the heart

I HADN'T been back home in Verde since the day I killed Roy Miles. I still wasn't sure why I had come back. There was nothing in Verde for me. My pa was dead. He hadn't been much good and he had left me nothing, so there wasn't anything in a family way to bring me back.

I'd had a few friends. Roy Miles had been one of them. We had both started chasing after Laura Jean Nason, and when she began to favor me Roy got sore. One day when he was a little tight he pulled a gun on me and I killed him. It was self-defense, but everyone held me to be a no-good loafer, so a few hints were dropped my way about getting out of Verde if I knew what was good for me. I rode away without even saying good-by to Laura Jean.

I guess she was the reason I was back here again. I had denied it from the very first minute I got the idea of returning to Verde, but I knew it was true.

There was a small, painful lump in my throat as I turned into the main drag. I let the bay move on at a walk. I made the turn at the St. George Hotel before I saw her. It was a shock that left a small numbness behind my eyes.

She sat in the light springwagon, her face lifted up to me. I reined in the bay so sharply he almost reared. Then, with my heart hammering in my chest, I could only stare at her while the old ache began in my throat.

SHE HAD changed with the years. She was a woman now. I could see that in the proud line of her shoulders and the rise of her figure under the white blouse. I could see it in the mature curve of her hips, that even the long velvet skirt could not conceal.

"Aren't you going to say hello, Len?" she asked huskily.

"Hello, Laura Jean," I said.

I couldn't take my eyes from her face. She was bareheaded, and the sun struck sharp blue glints out of her hair. She had strange, gold-flecked green eyes, her nose was somewhat thin, and her mouth was a little wide—but she was still very beautiful to me.

Her voice sounded eager and glad. "It's so nice to see you again, Len. I've thought about you lots of times. Why didn't you write and let me know how you were?"

I tried to speak lightly through the throb in my throat. "Oh, I knocked around a bit. Never did find time to sit down and write. You know how it is, Laura Jean."

There was a little girl sitting beside Laura Jean. The child was all done up in a crisp, white dress and had a bright red ribbon in her auburn hair. She looked about three or four years old.

I nodded at the child. "Yours?" I asked.

"I married Eddie Sheppard. You remember Eddie, don't you? His father died right after you left Verde. Eddie owns Turkey Track now. This is our daughter, Kathleen."

Kathleen lifted shy eyes to me, then quickly lowered them. She pouted.

"Hello, Kathleen," I said. "Aren't you going to talk to me?"

"Say hello," Laura Jean said. "You're going to see a lot of Len, Kathleen. He's going to come out to Turkey Track real often." She looked at me suddenly with grave, earnest eyes. "You are coming out, aren't you, Len? Soon?"

"Sure, Len, why don't you?"

It was spoken behind me. I reined the bay around and saw where he had come across the street. Now he stepped past me with a rather imperious tilt to his head and mounted to the seat of the wagon beside Laura Jean. Eddie Sheppard. . . .

He was a couple years older than me. His father had been the biggest rancher here in Chamas Valley. Sheppard was looking good, although he had begun to take on a paunch. He had mild blue eyes that always looked on the verge of tears. His tan fustian and pearl-grey trousers and cream-colored Stetson probably cost more than I spent on clothes in a year. With my battered black felt hat, blue denim shirt, and faded and patched levis I looked like a real bum compared to Eddie Sheppard.

He picked up the reins of the matched greys that were hitched to the wagon. Laura Jean leaned across him toward me, her face appealing.

"Do come out to Turkey Track, won't you, Len? Make it tomorrow afternoon. You can have supper with us. I'll be expecting you, so don't disappoint me. Eddie will be glad to have you, won't you, Eddie?"

I thought his lips tightened slightly. He kept on staring straight ahead. "Sure. I'm always glad to have friends of yours out to Turkey Track."

He clucked the matched greys into motion.

I REGISTERED at the St. George, but I couldn't stand the loneliness of my room and so I went downstairs to the hotel bar and had a couple of bourbons. Standing there by myself, I heard the door open and then the small, shrill sound of spurs coming up behind me.

I had no idea it was someone for me until he clapped me suddenly on the back and cried out, "Len Hardenburg, you old son! Welcome home!"

The surprise of it startled me and I turned rather sharply. He stood there, a big grin on his face, his hand thrust out at me.

"Hello, Wes," I said, taking his hand.

Wes Barlow had grown a little thinner since the last time I'd seen him. There were faint hollows in his cheeks, and the line of his jaw was more prominent. He had grown a mustache, a long, tawny growth that curved down over the corners of his mouth, having a handsome effect. He wore long sideburns now, too. As in the past, he was flashily dressed in black and white checkered trousers, a red shirt, and a yellow silk scarf at his throat.

He looked me up and down. "You're looking great, Len," he said. "Man, it's good to see you again."

He got a bottle of bourbon from the bartender and led me to a table in a corner. He sat down across from me, never taking his eyes off me.

"I'm the only one of the gang that's left, Len," he said, while his shrewd eyes studied me. "Nick Platt went down to the Border a couple years ago to run guns, but he collected a bullet with his name on it. Bud Ferres drifted north a while back and I haven't heard from him since. There's just me and you left of the old bunch, Len."

I didn't say anything.

"Yes, sir," he said, "it's sure good to see you." He reached across the table and tapped me lightly on the chest. "What have you been doing, Len?" he asked softly, winking at me.

"Oh, I've knocked around a little."

"Ha-ha," he laughed softly. "Good old Len. You run across any good deals? You run across any easy pickings?"

"I've changed," I told him. "I'm a work-

ing man now, Wes. I've punched cows for a living the last six years."

"Aaah," he said derisively. "Who you kidding?"

To change the subject, I said, "What're you doing?"

He shrugged. "Oh, taking it easy. I'm sitting back, waiting. When the right thing comes along I'm making my pile big and fast. That's me, Len."

Yes, that's you, Wes, I thought. He hadn't changed a bit. He had always had some scheme or other for making a pile of easy money. I suppose he had one going around in his brain right now.

He leaned forward across the table. "The day isn't so far off either, Len," he said. "Yes, sir! I've got it all figured out. Just a little time and a few breaks and I'll be all set."

I didn't know what to say. It was like old times, I guess, listening to Barlow talk like this. I had used to josh him about his fanciful schemes in the old days, but I didn't feel like joking now. All I felt was a little sad and bitter.

He raised his glass, his sly eyes very bright now. "Here's to me and my pile, Len. May I make it fast, and soon."

I RODE up Chamas Valley the next afternoon and pulled into Turkey Track headquarters late in the day. Laura Jean had been waiting for me. I could see in her face that she hadn't been too hopeful about my showing up, and she seemed vastly relieved that I had finally arrived.

We ate in the big house. I felt ill at ease during the whole meal. It was as if I didn't belong there. There were four of us in all. Eddie Sheppard was dressed in a long swallow-tail coat and a black string tie, and a starched white shirt with a high stiff collar, and a bright diamond ring twinkling on a finger of his left hand. I couldn't get over the feeling that he was deliberately putting on the dog just to make me feel cheap.

Laura Jean looked more beautiful than I had ever seen her. She wore a bright red dress that went well with the darkness of her hair and skin. Her shoulders were bare, and I couldn't keep my eyes off her.

The other person at the table was Madeline Sheppard, Eddie's sister. I remembered her as a shy, skinny kid of about fourteen when I had left Verde. Now I was surprised to find that she had grown into a very attractive woman. Like her brother, she was blonde, but more on the tawny side like the highly burnished hide of a mountain lion. She had clear blue eyes and thin, dark brows. A short upper lip gave her mouth the look of a constant pout, but there was nothing spoiled or sullen about her face. She was wearing a plain white dress with a high collar.

Eddie Sheppard kept telling me how well he was doing, what he was clearing on Turkey Track, all the while darting sharp, moist glances at Laura Jean. I could see what he was driving at. This was his way of telling Laura Jean how much better off she was being married to him instead of to a drifter like me.

It was all very unpleasant to me and so, as early as I could, I said I had to run along. I excused myself with Madeline and then I thanked Laura Jean and Eddie for having invited me over.

He looked at Laura Jean and said, "I'm always glad to entertain your friends. Why didn't you invite Barlow, too?"

Quick anger flared on her face, but she checked herself with an effort. She beckoned me to follow her and I went outside with her.

Night had fallen. The air was chill, and Laura Jean hugged her bare arms and shivered a little. We walked along like that, neither one of us saying anything, and finally Laura Jean halted.

"I'm sorry, Len," she said.

She was staring at the ground. Having her this close to me, feeling the sensual smell of her perfume in my nostrils, the old ache returned.

"It's all right," I told her.

SHE LIFTED her face suddenly, the anger lying there on her features bare and vicious. "You see how it is?" she said savagely. "It's always like this. I can't ever ask any of my old friends over

without him making those acid remarks."

I couldn't keep a little bitterness out of my tone. "Why did you marry him if he was like this?"

"Why?" she echoed in a strange, wondering whisper. "You're asking me that, Len? You ran out on me. I was lonely and heartbroken. I knew I'd never love any one else, so I married Eddie. He had wealth and security, so I married him. That's why, Len."

There was something stirring in me which I could not quite grasp. It was something like a mixture of bitterness and sadness, and maybe a little hate.

"You were lonely and heartbroken," I said, "yet you married him only three months after I was gone."

She sucked in her breath in an audible hiss. Her eyes half slitted and she stared up at me in a cold, speculative way. "So you checked up on me, Len? What did you except me to do? You never even wrote me a line. I had no idea where you were or if you would ever come back to Verde. You were the one who cut me off, and now you're going to make something of the fact that I married Eddie soon after you left!"

"All right," I said, getting angry. "That's over and past. Let's let it lie that way. Good night and good-by, Laura Jean."

I turned and started away, but she ran after me and caught my arm and cried pleadingly, "Please, Len. Don't go off mad like this. I'm sorry for what I said. Don't leave me. Don't run away from me again, not when I need you so much."

She was crying now. I stopped, and she put her face against my shirt. I could feel her warm and achingly close against me. I don't know what it was that made me look up at the house. Sheppard was standing there in the shadows, the glowing cigarette in his mouth giving his presence away. I took my arms away from around Laura Jean. She must have sensed it, too, for her head lifted, the tears abruptly gone, and stepped back a little from me. But she did not turn to face the house.

"Listen, Len," she said urgently, her voice low, for only my ears. "Stick around Verde a while. Don't go away too soon. I won't throw myself at you. I'll leave you strictly alone, if that's the way you want it. But please stay on in Verde. Just knowing that you're there makes it a lot easier for me. Promise me you'll stay, Len?"

I only nodded.

After she had gone, I went and got my horse. The glowing cigarette showed that Sheppard was still outside but seeing that I had my bay must have satisfied him, for he went inside. I mounted the bay and was just turning his head down the trail when Madeline Sheppard came up out of the darkness.

"I'd like a word with you before you go, Len," she said.

I didn't say anything. She hesitated a moment, then went on in a cool determined way. "I don't quite know how to put this, Len. It's something awkward to discuss. But what are your intentions regarding Laura Jean?"

"By golly, he really lives on his horse!"

I felt my face get warm. I was suddenly very angry and very anxious to get away from here but I put a check on the impulse and said quietly, "What makes you think I have any intentions regarding her?"

"Is there any law says I can't return to Verde?"

She sighed. "I'm doing this only because of my brother. He didn't send me, Len, but I'm doing it for him. Personally, I hate Laura Jean. She's no good for Eddie and

he'd be better off without her. You'd be doing everyone a big favor if you took her and packed her off with you. But Eddie is blindly in love with her.

"You wouldn't think so from the way he acts, but he's just pretending he doesn't care. I've heard my brother cry, Len. When he thought no one would see or hear him, I've heard him cry. For Eddie's sake, and Kathleen's, I'm asking you to leave Verde now."

I DIDN'T leave Verde, although I stopped staying in town. I bought myself some grub and rode up into the Jabez Range and camped there beside a small lake in a little valley. For a week I had nothing to break my solitude.

I had believed that alone like this I could think everything out carefully and unemotionally, and arrive at a definite conclusion. But at the end of a week I was still just as much mixed up and just as uncertain. I began to get angry, at myself, at the world, at the fate that had said I must love Laura Jean in such a hopeless, helpless way until I died.

One day a horseman appeared out of the timber down at the opposite end of the lake and began working his way around on the shore toward me. I began to feel a little strange inside, for as the rider came on I recognized him as Eddie Sheppard.

There was a grim, purposeful squaring of his shoulders as he came up. He reined in his palomino and sat there in his kak for a while, staring at me. We didn't say anything. I felt a coldness gathering in my throat. I had never seen Sheppard with a gun but now he was wearing a fancy silver-inlaid, ivory-handled .45 in an ornate, white-stitched holster.

Finally he dismounted and walked toward me, stopping when he was about ten feet away. "I am going to kill you, Len," he said quietly.

The anger was throbbing in my head now. "You're making fighting talk, Eddie," I told him thinly, "but you haven't told me why."

"All right," he shouted, "I'll tell you. There's a hidden valley here in the Jabez with a bunch of Turkey Track cows in it. Turkey Track cows with calves that carry a big H branded on their flanks. H for Hardenburg. Now do you know, Len?"

I felt a great pain begin in me. All those things that had puzzled me, that had made me so uncertain, were beginning to make sense at last.

"Why would I do a thing like that?" I asked him.

"Why? To get back at me because I married Laura Jean."

There was a wild look in his eyes now. He was desperate. He was whipping himself on until in his frenzy he acquired the courage to pull his iron. There was just one thing I could do. I reached for my .44.

I could have dropped him with no trouble, but I didn't want to kill him. He'd been badgered into this, driven half-crazy by jealousy. He was no killer. He was just a weak, scared man.

Knowing this, I lunged at him. I threw a shot past his head and he squawked in fear. His .45 went off wildly, the slug whining off into the timber. He was bringing the .45 up for another frantic try when I reached him. I swung at the side of his head with the barrel of my .44. He threw up his hands, warding off the blow. I swung again, brushing aside his arms this time, landing the barrel against the side of his skull. He went suddenly limp and collapsed without a sound to the ground.

I was standing over Sheppard, my whole body trembling, when a bullet came shrieking out of the timber at me. I felt its vicious *whish* pass me and then I went down, throwing myself behind the shelter of a bush. I hit the ground on my side and I kept rolling until I was in the shelter of the pines.

I CROUCHED on my knees in a small hollow, my breath coming achingly out of my throat. That was the only sound. All around me was the vast, solemn silence of the timber.

I unbuckled my spurs, for I didn't want their jingling to give me away, and then went off through the timber. I'd pause behind every tree trunk and look all around

me, studying the blank, inscrutable face of the forest, and when nothing showed, I'd move on to the next.

I lost all track of time. There was just one urgency in my mind. Then all at once my stalker showed, coming cautiously out from behind a pine as I was coming out from behind another. Here the trees made a small lane in the forest, and looking down the open space, I saw him throw the rifle to his shoulder.

I didn't have time to think who he was. I let go with my .44. I threw two bullets at him. He never got to fire the rifle. The weapon dropped from his hands and he folded abruptly, falling on top of the gun. He didn't move after that.

It had happened so fast I hadn't seen his face, but I didn't have to to know him. I knew it was Wes Barlow. I walked slowly up to him, the .44 in my hand, my heart hammering in my chest, ready for any trick he might pull. But as I came closer, the feeling crawled over me that he was past pulling any tricks. He was as dead as he would ever be.

I averted my eyes. When I finally looked up again, she was there, pulling Barlow's .44 Remington out of its holster.

Laura Jean.

She was wearing a red plaid shirt and new, copper-riveted blue jeans. She held Barlow's .44 in her hand, the muzzle of it gaping at me. It wasn't a surprise. I had been expecting it all along. I wasn't shocked or afraid. I was just sick.

IT ALL fitted in. The whole thing was just another one of Wes Barlow's wild, fanciful schemes. I could see him planning this one, his eyes shining with avarice and excitement. Rustle a few Turkey Track cows and calves, brand the calves with a big H, get Laura Jean to work on poor Eddie Sheppard until he was crazy with hurt and jealousy, and then send him gunning for me.

Sheppard would have no chance drawing against me. I would kill him and be sent to the pen for the rest of my life—if I wasn't hanged. It was a plan I would have laughed at, if he had ever told it to me, but it wasn't funny now, with Wes Barlow lying dead on the forest floor, and Laura Jean holding his gun on me.

"How does it feel, Len?" she was saying. "How does it feel to know you're going to die?"

I wondered that I felt so little inside me, that my love for her could have vanished so abruptly and completely. I could stare at her and nothing moved me, nothing but a vast, violent distaste.

"You had to play it noble, didn't you, Len?" she went on when I said nothing. "You had to knock Eddie out instead of killing him, didn't you? You poor, damn fool. Why didn't you kill him and run? You'd have saved your life at least. You had to spare him and kill Wes. I loved Wes. We were going to do great things together. But you've killed him."

I saw the madness distend her eyes. The .44 was still in my hand. I hadn't dropped it or holstered it. She fired and I pulled trigger as I saw flame leap out of the muzzle of the Remington in her hand and strike me in the side.

I winced with pain and shut my eyes. When I opened them Laura Jean was down on her knees, holding the Remington with both hands. With both thumbs she was hauling back the hammer, her face grimacing with the pain the effort caused her, but she got the hammer back to full cock, and then began to steady the Remington.

I waited. I'd put one slug in her, but I knew I couldn't put another. I could only wait, watching the muzzle of the Remington searching for me, wavering from side to side, then steadying, slowly and carefully, until it was in line with my stomach.

Great beads of sweat stood out on Laura Jean's face. She was groaning and sobbing. She clenched her teeth down on her lower lip and I saw the hate flare in her eyes.

The Remington blasted, but she was already falling forward and the slug kicked dirt over the toes of my boots.

I sank down to the ground and began examining the wound in my side. It didn't look too serious. The slug looked as if it had grazed and glanced off a rib and come out again.

I didn't notice Sheppard coming out of the forest. I just looked and he was kneeling beside Laura Jean. He kissed her dead face and then he began to moan and cry.

I got up and walked over beside him. I still felt sick inside. The pain from my wound was something mild compared to that other hurt inside me.

"Eddie," I said. "Listen to me, Eddie. I can tell you how it was."

He lifted a pain-racked face up to me. The tears streamed down his cheeks. "Shut up, will you?" he shouted. "I heard everything she said."

I didn't say any more. I went off to one side and waited for him to pull himself together.

Coming out of the Jabez, neither one of us spoke. It wasn't until we came to where Turkey Track began that I said to Sheppard, "Listen, Eddie. This is how it was. Barlow was rustling Turkey Track beef. Laura Jean found him out and to shut her up he killed her. Then I killed him."

He looked at me in a strange way. For the first time there seemed to be a faint glimmer of hope in his eyes. His mouth worked, but he couldn't get any words out.

"I think it would be the best that way," I went on. "For you and for Kathleen. You can depend on n . not to tell it any other way. That all right with you, Eddie?"

I saw him stare at me as if he was seeing me for the first time. His voice came gruff and barely audible.

"Thanks, Len."

NOW THAT I look back on it, there had been nothing that had brought me back to Verde, and there was nothing to hold me here. I packed my things and paid my bill at the St. George. I got my bay and rode out of Verde.

Madeline was out on the flats waiting for me. When she saw me, she angled her palomino over to intercept me. I reined in the bay. I watched her come up, halt the palomino, and fold her hands over the saddlehorn.

She looked me straight in the eye. "Running away again, Len?" Madeline Sheppard said softly.

I flushed a little. I could deny it, but what she said was true.

"If you run away now," she went on quietly, "you'll always keep on running. This is the kind of thing that can eat at your mind, Len, until you go crazy. You know that. You know how you'll brood about it when you're alone and you'll make lots of efforts to be alone so you can brood. It's no good for you, Len." She reached out and laid a hand on my arm.

"Laura Jean never had me fooled, Len. I got Eddie to admit the truth. I want you to know how much I appreciate what you've done. If you were another kind you could have told what really happened in the Jabez and laid a blot on Eddie's life, and on Kathleen's. I want to thank you for what you've done. But is it really necessary for you to leave Verde?"

I shrugged. There was a thickness in my throat. "There's nothing in or around Verde to keep me here."

She looked at me in a strange, direct way. "Are you sure there isn't?"

Then I saw it. The heartbreak faded away, the sadness went, the disillusionment was forgotten. I saw something else come to take the place of these. I saw Madeline for the first time. She must have sensed that I had finally grasped it for she colored a little, though her gaze never wavered. She beckoned with her head toward Verde.

"Well, shall we go, Len?" she asked.

"Why not?" I said happily, reining the bay around. "Why not, Madeline?"

THE BEST WESTERN AUTHORS WRITE FOR

RANCH ROMANCES

Shirt-Tail Soldier

By HAL G. EVARTS

"Hunt wanted you to have them," she said

BRECK POMEROY slid from his saddle before the two-story 'dobe that passed for Tubita's leading hotel and tossed his reins over the tie-rail. He eyed half a dozen horses hitched there, heads drooping in the hot, still dusk. With a frown at the loaded *carreta* in the stable yard across the street, he swung back to Sergeant Kincaid.

"You sure it's my brother?" he asked.

"He rode into town this afternoon," Kincaid said. "Saw him myself."

Pomeroy said, "Thanks, Kincaid," and pushed through the swinging doors. Two soldiers from the post stiffened at his entry, and a Mexican gave him a sidelong glance as he crossed to the bar. In another hour he would have been gone; he could still duck out and avoid this meeting. But anger as well as stubbornness had brought him here, and he stood squarely in the doorway, inspecting the parlor beyond.

The girl saw Pomeroy first. She rose from a writing desk in the far corner and came directly to him, a faint smile on her lips. Mary Benton was slender and fair,

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HUNT PROVED his point too late for argument from Breck

with a look of fresh, frank wonder that marked her a newcomer to the Territory. She wore a dark, sensible traveling dress and her face held an expression of mock gravity as she said, "We're ready, Lieutenant, whenever the escort is."

For the moment Pomeroy had forgotten her and the special problem that she represented. He said with mild impatience, "So you've decided to come with us?"

"Papa told you I'd do just as I pleased." She watched him with her quizzical half-smile.

He was a deliberate, soft-spoken man, with coarse black hair and skin burned to the texture of rawhide. A lifetime of army tradition and eight years on the frontier had ingrained into him a formality of manner, a certain remote, hard-bitten cast that covered, Mary Benton suspected, real shyness.

"Sometimes," she said, "personal reasons count more than practical ones. You should know that, Lieutenant."

HE GAVE her a sharp look. Then, from the adjoining room, he heard a familiar laugh, echoed by Doc Benton's chuckle. With a nod, he moved past her around the corner toward the long plank table where two men lingered over coffee and cigars.

Dean Benton, the contract surgeon, waved a chubby hand. "There you are, Pomeroy. I'm having one last decent meal before I go back on issue beef. Come join us."

Pomeroy said, "Evening, doctor," and came to a full stop, feeling the tightness gather in him.

The second man shoved back his chair and stood up, grinning slightly. Hunter Pomeroy was younger than Breck by five years, taller, with the same wiry build and dark eyes. But there was about him a casual, off-hand ease that clashed with his brother's intensity.

After the barest hesitation he held out his hand. "Hi, Breck. Been a long time."

"Hello, Hunt. It's good to see you again," Pomeroy said, and shook hands.

He had fought with his brother just once, the day Hunt had resigned his commission and hired out to a freighter for twice a second lieutenant's pay. In the two years since, Hunt had gone his spectacular way, quick with cards and a gun, quicker still of temper, until, one step leading to another, he had shot a crooked monte dealer. Not wild, but reckless, a come-easy-go-easy kid with a flair for trouble.

"Buy you a drink?"

"No," Pomeroy said. "If the doctor will excuse us, I'd like a word with you."

"Sure," Hunt said. "Planning to look you up anyway." Following Pomeroy into the bar, he slapped down a dollar and turned, eyebrows lifted. "Still nursing a grudge, Breck?"

"I never did. But I thought maybe you—" Pomeroy broke off in embarrassment.

"Thought maybe I was in another jam?" Hunt laughed. Matter of fact, I heard Mary Benton was here and rode in to see her. I knew her in Yuma last year. But she's leaving for Lane tonight on your ammunition train."

"Did she tell you that?"

"No secret, is it? What's on your mind?"

Pomeroy drew a long breath. He could remember a tearful boy, years ago, reading aloud: "The Secretary of War regrets to inform you that Coloney Pomeroy fell at Chapultepec—;" that same cold-legged youngster fumbling through his manual at the Point; and later, a green-grass shavetail mounting his first patrol. He could remember so much because he had tried to raise that boy and shape him to the only career he knew.

Now Hunt was here, a killing behind him, for what purpose Pomeroy could make an uneasy guess. "Hunt," he said, "are you riding into Sonora with the filibusters?"

"Guess that's no secret either," Hunt said. "Why don't you throw in with us?"

Pomeroy stared at him.

"All right." Hunt shrugged. "I didn't expect you to. But it's the chance of a lifetime. We have the men; we'll sweep south across the border, straight to the

capital. The whole province will drop in our laps like a ripe tomato."

"We're not at war with Mexico."

"That's what they said about Texas and California. But they're in the Union, aren't they? We'll set up a provisional government and appeal for annexation. That'll force Washington's hand. The army will have to back us up."

"With a bunch of shirt-tail soldiers?" Pomeroy said. "You'll fall apart the first Mexican *rurales* you meet. Where will you get guns?"

"We'll get the guns." Hunt toyed with his glass for a moment and then drained it. "We can use a few more officers like you. Major's pay with bonuses—double what you're drawing now."

Pomeroy shook his head. He knew the sort these schemes of empire attracted: the malcontents, the down-and-outers, visionaries, the impulsive, headlong men like his brother. These plots hatched in bars and ended on some bloody, sun-baked village plaza.

"Hunt," he said, "don't do it. You could get your commission back, with the Old Man's record, and—"

"And ride patrol the rest of my life—if some Apache didn't lift my hair first?" Hunt snorted. "Don't preach the Old Man's record to me. Sure it's good. But it's all he had left to show for thirty years' soldiering."

"That'll do." Pomeroy's voice was suddenly harsh. "At least he could ride into a town without watching his hind trail."

The grin froze on Hunt's mouth. "Fair enough," he said. "You've alway laid the law to me. You treat your little tin-god service rules like they were religion. Mostly I took it. But not any more. Not from you, Breck. Remember that next time."

Pomeroy put a hand on his shoulder. "Hunt, wait."

But his brother shook him off and walked on through the door into the street.

THE TRAIN moved out through the south gate at tattoo, down the bluff across the wet-smelling river bottoms, through the fringe of cottonwoods and out across the moon-washed mesa—four government wagons and Doc Benton's dragging *carreta*. One officer and eight men to guard a load of rifles, powder and food along the hundred-mile trail to Fort Lane. Pomeroy sent out a point and took up a plodding walk at the column's head, sweeping the night horizon front and rear. Spread too thin, he thought, always too thin for the job.

But the man is less important than the mission, and someone always closes up the intervals. When the Old Man went down, his exec took the regiment and smashed the Mexican flank. Maybe I'll never last it out to wear his eagles. Hunt could be right about that, but he's dead wrong about everything else.

Dust billowed up in a dense, gritty cloud, axles groaned, wheels jolted, mules settled into their harness for the long dry haul. They went down off the flats into a broken, twisted country of arroyos and canyons, sprinkled with stunt juniper that could hide a lookout or a hundred coup-crazy bucks. An hour before dawn they reached the first waterhole, and Pomeroy boxed his wagons and gave the order to bivouac. He was scarcely out of his saddle when a lone rider came pounding in from the south.

"Corporal Drake, sir. Courier from Fort Lane."

Pomeroy returned his salute. "More trouble there?"

"Not lately. Novaro's been too quiet, if you ask me."

"Any news of the filibusters, Corporal?"

"Five bushwhackers hanging around the sutler's store last week, sir, claiming they were miners, asking questions. Captain ordered 'em off the post."

Pomeroy walked on to the surgeon's cart. The girl was bent over a wash basin, rinsing her face and hands in the brackish water. Her dress was wrinkled now, and grey with trail dust, but she still carried a look of wide-eyed alertness.

He cleared his throat, and she glanced at him over her towel, saying. "I'll try not to get underfoot."

Pomeroy knew he should make a gracious reply, that her desire to help was genuine,

but the habit was bred into him. He said, "The courier will push on to Tubita after sundown. You can rest here through the day and ride back with him. You'll be safer there."

Her smile faded. "You make that sound like an order."

"It's just good sense."

"Waste of breath, Pomeroy." Doc Benton wheezed up from the seep, his shirt dark with sweat. "Can't tell her a thing. I know. Raised her myself. Headstrong as one of your mules."

"But, sir, I strongly urge—"

"Never mind me, Papa," Mary said. "You crawl under that canvas and catch some sleep before it gets too hot. The lieutenant knows how to handle mules."

Pomeroy felt the back of his neck redden. Turning on his heel, he crossed to the picket line, where Private Grady was currying mounts under Kincaid's watchful eye. The sergeant looked up with a grin.

"Sergeant," Pomeroy said, "check canteens and revolver loads. We'll rotate a two-hour guard. Move out at retreat. And on the march keep one man alongside the surgeon's cart. Any questions?"

"No, sir."

POMEROY bedded down in the shade of a cutbank, slept fitfully and awoke to a murderous midday heat. The long, fretful afternoon dragged by. He busied himself oiling and cleaning his guns, avoiding the Benton wagon. The skinners were hitching up after an early supper when the lookout signaled a rider on the Tubita trail. Ten minutes later Hunt loped in, trailing a spare horse.

He came straight to water and dismounted. Nodding at Pomeroy, he touched his hat to Doc Benton and chatted with Mary while his animals drank. Pomeroy watched in tight, puzzled silence. This was the shortest route to the border, but no man traveled it by day, not even an Indian, unless he had to. Hunt's mount wasn't lathered, as it normally would be after the long, punishing ride across the mesa.

Presently he left the group by the wagons and sauntered over to Pomeroy. "Why don't you say it, Breck? Tell me to get the hell out."

Pomeroy's lips compressed. "Look, Hunt," he said, "I know where you're heading, and why. Technically, I could put you under military arrest and send you back to Tubita for violation of the neutrality laws. Don't make me do it."

"You don't know anything," Hunt said. "I came this way to say good-by to my girl."

"Your girl? Mary Benton?"

Hunt looked across at her and brought his glance back to Pomeroy. "I asked her to marry me—once."

Pomeroy said carefully, "Then maybe she'll listen to you. Take her back to Tubita."

"Can't. I'm in a hurry."

"Kind of crowding your luck, aren't you?"

"Apaches?" Hunt shrugged. "They won't jump me. Not with an escort train they can pick off just as easy."

Pomeroy started to say, "Suit yourself," and checked himself. Another twenty-four hours' hard riding would put Hunt in Sonora, beyond army jurisdiction, or help. It was a poor man's choice, and Pomeroy made it reluctantly. "Hunt," he said, "don't get any deeper into this thing. Go back to the States. If it's money you need, I'll scrape up a stake somehow."

"It's too big for that," Hunt said. "Too big and too late. *Adois,* Breck." Swinging back to his saddle, he changed horses and mounted. He lifted a hand to Pomeroy and turned with a smile for Mary. "Breck promised to take good care of you."

"I'm sure he did—under protest." She waved. "Take care of yourself, Hunt."

POMEROY watched him disappear at a trot into the haze of the hills. Then he got the wagons under way. His brother, he decided, hadn't confided his plans to the girl, which seemed reassuring.

Later he drifted up toward Sergeant Kincaid, and they jogged along knee to knee in the thickening twilight for some time before he said, "What do you make of that?"

Kincaid grunted. "Same as you, Lieutenant. He was lyin' back in the brush

somewheres, scoutin' our setup, before he rode in."

Whatever Kincaid might think, Pomeroy knew, he would never offer an opinion unless directly asked. It was Pomeroy's brother, and his responsibility. But because he understood Hunt so well, or imagined that he did, he could not condemn him for that alone. There had to be a reason, Pomeroy told himself; Hunt had his shortcomings, but he wasn't a damn fool.

"Well," he said, "keep your eyes skinned, Kincaid." He returned to the train.

That they had been under constant observation since leaving Tubita he never doubted. The book said no Apache would attack before dawn, but Novaro had written his own blood-soaked chapter in a dozen night strikes, always erupting from nowhere, without warning. It was worse than useless to cruise the sidehills and draws hunting for sign. Pomeroy kept his wagon bunched, pushing them hard. Once through the Narrows, out on the open desert, he would run less risk of surprise. It would take ten hours, he figured.

The minute attention to details that kept a man breathing came automatically to him: a skittish horse, an off-key coyote call, the smell of fresh-stirred dust, and straining until the eyeballs ached and nerves frayed raw. It was like every night escort he had ridden, tedious and unrelieved, with only the promise of ambush or another blazing, sleepless day at its end. He could not blame any man for choosing a different way, least of all his brother. But neither could he shake the one nagging question: Why had Hunt scouted their camp?

Ten hours, he'd figured, but a mile north of the Narrows his number three wagon threw a rim and the train ground to a halt. An hour's delay, his boss skinner said, maybe more, and broke out a maul. Pomeroy ruled out a dry camp on the spot, planning to push through after daybreak and put the hills behind him. He called in his point and waited out the repair, while the night shadows thinned and the sky took on a pale, brassy, pre-dawn cast.

They were about ready to roll again when Mary Benton stepped down from the *carreta* seat and came up to his horse. Fatigue showed in the fine lines about her mouth but the warmth of her voice caught him off guard. "I'm sorry about yesterday," she said. "I didn't mean to be sarcastic."

"You weren't," he said "It's your privilege to visit Fort Lane if you want."

"Not what I want, Lieutenant. It's what I think I should do. It's Papa."

He repressed a smile at the thought of this girl fretting over a hulk like Doc Benton. From their first meeting he had regarded her as wilful, a little too self-centered, but liking her candor. Now, because of Hunt, he was especially anxious that she like him.

"Something wrong with Doc?" he said.

"Papa doesn't belong out here. It's too strenuous a life for a man his age. He ought to be tendin' his practice back in Rhode Island, but he says that's too dull, and this is exciting. So, as long as he stays, I'll follow him." She paused. "Do you have any idea at all why I'm telling you this?"

"No, I don't."

"It's Hunt. You're worried about him."

"He can look after himself."

She made a gesture of impatience. "You don't believe that, any more than I do about Papa. They're children, both of them, overgrown children. Oh, I know about this filibuster business."

Pomeroy stared at her, wondering how she had sensed his feeling so readily. "But do you know what it means? If Hunt isn't shot in Sonora, he'll be arrested when he comes back."

"Yes, I know," she said quietly. She gave him a long, intent look. "But you can't change people, no matter how much you want to protect them. So maybe we'd be better off to accept them the way they are."

"You're pretty fond of Hunt, aren't you?"

"He's honest with himself," she said. "I like that in any man."

Pomeroy hesitated. "Miss Benton, I'm going to ask you a personal question. Are you going to marry him?"

SHE LOOKED AWAY from him, sudden color flooding her cheeks, and lowered her eyes. Pomeroy stood with his hands flat along the seams of his trousers, wishing he could bite off his tongue for once more having said the wrong thing; first to Hunt, and now to his girl.

Doc Benton waddled up to them, a cigar between his teeth, and nudged Pomeroy in the ribs. "Here now, son. No lallygagging. I told you she was stubborn."

"Papa," Mary said, "stop trying to marry me off. The lieutenant's got his mind on Indians."

"Looks like old Novaro's on good behavior this time, hey?" Doc said almost plaintively. "Quiet as a church."

It was a pointless remark, and Pomeroy turned his irritation on the man. There was, he supposed, a basic resemblance between his brother and the doctor, a common thread of immaturity that led them on from one feckless venture to another. Like Doc Benton, Hunt never saw anything through to a finish. "I wouldn't be too optimistic yet," he said, and gave the sign to move out.

With the sun an hour high, the train crawled on into the narrows, a twisting, three-mile gut so narrow in places the wheel hubs scraped. The steep clay banks imprisoned the heat and the barren rock benches above shimmered under the morning sky. No cover, no room to swing a wagon, no turn-out wide enough to corral. Pomeroy rode in the lead, eyes slitted against the glare, a cold sweat working down his back.

They wound over the sag at the summit and down the grade on the desert side in a fog of dust, the mules braying their thirst and fighting the drag of the brakes. Cutting around the last bend, Pomeroy saw the vee of the canyon mouth, a splash of green on the yellow flats beyond, and let out a long, slow breath. Then, from a boulder twenty yards ahead, a man rose and motioned with a rifle. Pomeroy reined up and raised a hand, the train piling up behind him.

A driver swore, someone grumbled, "Helluva place to stop," and then Pomeroy was able to recognize his brother.

"Easy does it," Hunt called. "We've got the outfit ringed."

For a long, silent minute Pomeroy sat rigid, held by a terrible concentration, peering at him. "What is this—a holdup?"

Hunt watched with a fixed grin, covering the escort. "We're taking the wagons. Order your men to dismount and stack."

Mary Benton gasped. Pomeroy caught the glint of another barrel among the rocks above, and the pattern came clear to him with simple obvious finality. The filibusters, probably a handful of them, had assembled here to grab his ammunition and run it across the line. It was so obvious, Pomeroy told himself, that he should have forseen a try like this, anticipated it, instead of letting personal bias flaw his judgment. Keeping his voice low, he said, "Put down the gun, Hunt. We're coming through."

Hunt regarded him coldly. "Climb down, Breck. I mean it," he stated. Pomeroy moistened his lips. Whatever he did within the next few seconds he knew he would regret the rest of his life, because for the first time he saw clearly in Hunt the result of his own mistakes and failings. He realized too, with a sharp, sick certainty, that this thing had begun long ago, growing over the years, until it had come to overshadow them both, too big for either of them to back out of now.

This time Hunt would stand up to a showdown, senselessly perhaps, but for reasons sufficient to a man bent on justifying bravado in front of a woman.

"I'll give you one minute," Breck said, "to comb your crew out of the rocks and let me pass."

Hunt brought up his rifle and cocked the hammer, his face set. "Get down!"

Pomeroy slid one foot out of his stirrup. You can't change people, he thought, and you can't change yourself. You can only do the best you know, and hope it's right. "Hunt," he said, "you're under arrest."

But it was Doc Benton, near-sighted and short of breath, blinking around with curiosity, who had the final word. He stood up in his cart and pointed. "Judas Priest!

Look up on the ridge!" Unbelievably, he pitched forward off the seat with an arrow through his throat.

POMEROY'S horse reared and he jumped clear, landing on his feet. He got the briefest glimpse of copper-skinned figures swarming down over the rocks. Then he was running. "Dismount!" he called. "Everybody under the wagon-beds!" Grabbing Doc by a leg, he pulled him under the *carreta* and flung himself down on the sand as he tugged at his gun.

He saw one naked Apache fall, heard Kincaid's blaspheming growl, the scream of a filibuster clubbed where he lay on a ledge above the trail. There was only one enemy faction now, for Novaro made no distinction except between living and dead.

Novaro, the wiliest campaigner of them all, had held back to spring his double ambush on soldier and bushwhacker together. Two drivers were down in the first volley, and Private Grady, and how many others Pomeroy didn't dare guess. His brother was crouched behind a wheel, shooting between the spokes, and Mary Benton huddled over her father.

The next few minutes were a fevered blur to Pomeroy—the bucking frenzy of the mules, arrowheads thudding into the planking, the sting of black powdersmoke, a paint-daubed face at pointback range. It was his training, experience and discipline compressed into a snake-belly canyon, held in under a withering fire. The furious thought was in his mind that no man, white or Indian, would take his wagons as long as he could squeeze a trigger.

They stopped the first rush, held it on the bald slopes above, for not even Navaro's warriors could face the deadly carbine counterfire. A stifling hush settled over the bottoms. Pomeroy got to his hands and knees and looked along the line of his command. He had water, food and ammunition, and maybe a dozen men to hold an untenable position. There could be only one ending here unless he broke a messenger through. He hooked the gun from Doc Benton's waistband and handed it, butt first, to Mary.

"You know how to use it?"

She took it wordlessly and nodded.

He called Sergeant Kincaid from the next wagon and squatted down beside him. "It's fifty miles back to Tubita, Kincaid, and a thousand-to-one chance a rider can get out of this canyon in daylight. But if we wait till dark we won't have a mount left. Captain Endroe should be able to get here with B Company in twenty-four hours. Some of us may still be alive. I want a volunteer."

"You got one, Lieutenant."

"They'll nail you before you make the first bend." It was Hunt, crawling up behind them. His eyes were glazed and his mouth pinched, the pride dead in him now, the bright, ambitious dream of conquest burned out.

HUNT rubbed the back of his hand over his face. "I'm no soldier. I brought five men here. Everyone of 'em's lying dead up on the ridge. But I'm telling you the sergeant needs a diversion or he'll never reach his horse."

"If we pull through this I'll see you tried, so help me," Pomeroy snapped.

"No you won't, Breck. You're too soft. You always were. You'd have let me shoot you out of the saddle before you went for your gun. So you'll listen now. You'll do it my way, because you can't stop me."

"It's too late for heroics, Hunt."

The barest grin touched the corners of Hunt's mouth. To Kincaid he said, "You'll know when to move out, Sergeant." For an instant he met Pomeroy's stare. "I'm taking a wagon, Breck. Good luck." He crept forward under the cart.

He paused beside Mary, leaned close to her ear and spoke in an undertone. Pomeroy saw her fingers clasp something, saw her solemn look. He shouted, "Keep down!" but Hunt was up, running past the Benton team, then diving under the lead wagon.

Breck saw the first twist of smoke from the wagon. So did the Apaches, poised on the ridge for another attack. They waited, suspecting some trick. A flame licked over one side, scorching the wood, and the can-

vas went up in a roaring orange spout. Then Hunt was in the seat, kicking off the brake lock, and the fear-crazed mules plunged down the grade with the wagon's blazing mass on their heels.

Along the ridge, Indians leaped to their feet and raced down over the slope to cut him off. Pomeroy understood then, and his eyes were blurred and his throat was tight as he fired and reloaded. Fifty yards, a hundred, and still the wagon gathered headway down the trail, obscured by flame and smoke. And then, at the mouth of the Narrows, the fire ate through to its heart. A terrific concussion shook the earth as fifty kegs of black powder exploded. Pomeroy saw a flash, a geyser of dirt and rocks, a final shower of sparks.

When he picked himself off the ground and looked around, Sergeant Kincaid had slipped away with a horse.

THE RELIEF COLUMN from Tubita reached them two days later—eight men, three of them wounded, and one woman. Nobody could count the Apaches because Novaro had withdrawn with his dead.

Down by the canyon mouth they found a depression gouged by the blast, and in the rocks nearby, a pair of muleshoes and the charred heel of a boot. The official report to the Adjutant General gave a sparse, military account of the action and listed the dead, citing one man, a civilian, for exceptional valor. There was no mention of filibusters. The man who wrote it, Lieutenant Pomeroy, and the men who served under him, had their own kind of loyalty....

In the weeks that followed the presence of Mary Benton did much to alleviate the sense of loss and bitter frustration Breck felt. She understood Breck as she had understood Hunt, and as she became resigned to her father's death Breck came to understand her, too. Her warmth melted the military inflexibility of his thoughts and he sought her company more and more with pleasure, and finally love.

It was months later before he worked up nerve enough to ask Mary what Hunt had told her that morning in the Narrows, just before he fired the wagon. She gave him a gentle smile and kissed him.

"I wondered if you'd ever ask me that," she said. "Maybe I shouldn't have waited so long to tell you. But I had to be sure how you felt about him—and about me."

"Maybe I shouldn't ask," Pomeroy said.

"He gave me these for you. He wanted you to have them, when the time came." She held out a tarnished pair of second lieutenants' bars.

Pomeroy held them in his hand, knowing in that moment how close they'd really been despite the separate trails they had ridden. He felt that the gold bars would bring him courage and understanding when future decisions were hard.

He put the bars in his pocket, and turned to Mary. She didn't speak as he put his arms around her and drew her close to him.

KNOW YOUR WEST

(Answers to the questions on page 46)

1. Because of their damage to grass, prairie dogs have for many years been systematically poisoned by stockmen and by the United States Biological Survey.

2. Texas in 1845, California in 1850.

3. Arizona.

4. It means that the bulldogger is allowed to leave the chute immediately behind the steer instead of a full steer-length or other distance, as was more common in the past.

5. Wyoming.

6. No. Squeezin' Lizzie means grabbing the saddlehorn on a bucking horse.

7. That he'd better start moving, or go.

8. Abrahām.

9. Idaho.

10. (a) Eight A Bar (Ate a b'ar), (b) E Zee Two Cee (Easy to see), (c) A Bar Gin (A Bargain), (d) Little E VA (Little Eva).

KILLER TRAILS

By
MYRTLE JULIETTE COREY
and AUSTIN CORCORAN

THE STORY SO FAR:

ADA KINGSLEY, fearing involvement in the murder of her former New York employer, flees to Denver. In the railroad station, despite her protests, a cowboy helps her with her luggage. When Ada sees headlines giving her staid, business-like appearance, she makes a complete, glamorous transformation, and decides to hide out in the small town of Ute Springs.

At ANGIE BELL'S hotel Ada meets friendly, wealthy widower JOHN DOLAN, principal owner of The Golden Gate. Dolan is attacked that night outside Ada's hotel window by a robber who shoots him. Ada runs to his aid, the robber gets away, and the Denver cowboy helps her with Dolan. Ada is reassured when the cowboy fails to recognize her. Dolan, dying, tells Ada she reminds him of his wife, and he is leaving his estate to her. He cautions her not to be taken in by OSCAR LANT, his Golden Gate partner. Ada's fortune makes her newsworthy, which is what she must avoid.

An FBI agent who had trailed her from New York insists upon searching her room for something that was taken from murdered WINTHROP'S office. While searching he falls to the floor, blood spreading beneath his head. Ada runs in terror from the room. She meets the cowboy, BRANDY CRAIG, in the lobby. They return to the room together, but find it empty.

There had been no warning sound, but she knew that somebody was close to her

PART TWO

ANGIE BELL was giving Pando instructions for the next day, but she snapped to startled attention when Craig announced that a thief had just made his getaway from Ada's room. Angie demanded details.

"I'd been in the lobby a few minutes," Ada began, fumbling for an explanation that would cover the situation without betraying herself. She was uneasily conscious that Brandy was listening intently. "When I got back, this man was in the room, and—"

"Why didn't you scream for help?" Angie broke in crisply. "You could yell loud enough the other night."

"He had a gun," Ada replied, glad that she remembered the bulge in his pocket. "I didn't dare do a thing. When he didn't find anything in my purse he threw it down, and

then he slipped on the waxed floor. I jumped back through the doorway and ran down the hall. When I got out here, I bumped into Brandy. He went back with me, but the man was gone."

"Got out the window," Angie said. "What'd he look like?"

Ada brushed a hand across her eyes as if to clear her memory.

"Well," she replied vaguely, "he was tall, and I think he had on a grey suit."

"Was he light or dark?"

"Light, I guess."

"I guess he scared you till you aren't sure if he was an Indian or a white man," Angie said. "I'll give Bart Weaver a ring. We'll take a look through those rooms, but I'll bet your burglar lit out fast."

"He did," Craig agreed. "After Ada caught him, all he wanted was to break away."

They could say that, because they didn't know who he was.

Ada was certain that no more than five minutes passed between the time she darted from her room and her return with Brandy. That the body she left on the floor had come to life and jumped from the window was unbelievable. He must have moved with equal speed to chance going into the public hall to escape that way.

"Come out of it!" Brandy's teasing voice recalled her. "When a guy takes you out, don't you give him any attention?"

"Sure I do, lots!" she replied, dismissing further speculations regarding the FBI agent until she could be alone. . . .

A buzz of voices and clinking of glasses came through the open doorway of the Golden Gate. Ada's glance swung over the line-up at the bar, then the groups around tables beyond the railing, noticing there were a number of women in the Saturday night crowd. A ruddy-faced, sportily dressed man was clamoring for a poker game.

"The night this place opened," he said, "the boss won my roll. My next trip through here, I stop for my revenge—and the fellow's dead."

"Beg pardon, sir," Lant said, leaning across the railing. "That can be fixed. Pete Knowlson, a friend of our old boss, happens to be here tonight. He is willing to take over for the house, if you and any of these other gentlemen want a game."

"Liar!" Craig muttered.

"Why?" Ada demanded in a low tone.

"Oh, nothing. Forget it!" Brandy replied, trying to turn her to the gate in the railing. She hung back.

"No, tell me," she insisted. "What did Lant lie about?"

"Dolan hated that guy," Craig said. "Wouldn't have him around the place. But that's no matter now. Come on and let me show you how the roulette wheel works."

"Who is Knowlson?" Ada persisted.

"He's a shady bird," Craig replied. "Had to get out of this county in a hurry once, because of a crooked deal."

SHE SAID no more. She glanced occasionally at the group including the ruddy-faced man that settled themselves around a felt-covered table near the rear of the room. It was when they were looking on at a black-jack game that she first noticed the platinum blonde. The dark eyes below her colorless hair were made up to increase their size and brilliance. She was watching Ada with obvious interest. Presently she came over.

"As soon's you came in with Brandy, I guessed who you were," she said. "I'm Paula Sylvester. My husband's running the black-jack. I stick around a lot and help the boys when I can. When Lant takes the wheel, I rack the chips for him." There was an undercurrent of boastfulness in her voice, and Ada sensed that Paula was putting over her intimate association with the gate.

As Paula started to speak again, a hoarse shout broke in.

"You damned, cheating—" The final words were drowned out by the crash of a chair on the bare floor.

Ada whirled to face the poker table.

The ruddy-face man was on his feet, big fist threatening a gaunt, high-cheekboned man across the table.

"You dealt yourself that ace from the bottom of the deck!" he shouted.

All eyes in the room were fixed on the poker group.

Ada couldn't hear what the man she guessed to be Knowlson replied. He was staring at his accuser, eyes insolently narrowed.

"Damn you, I know you did!" The enraged player pounded the table with a fist. "I had my eye peeled for tricks. I know that club ace was on the bottom of the deck, that last cut. If you try to take that pot, I'll—"

"Hold it, mister," Lant said authoritatively. He had hurried from the front of the room. "There must be some mistake, gentlemen."

"Sure, there's a mistake!" the red-faced man broke in. "My catching on. You didn't figure on that. I saw you give this Knowlson a signal before you flagged me. You had me lined up for a good sucker to trim. You're crooks, both of you!"

"You're drunk," Lant said curtly.

Ada had moved toward them, unheeding Brandy's restraining hand on her arm.

"Stop, right now!" she ordered. "And you, sir, take back whatever you bet on that game."

The ruddy-faced man had jerked his head around to stare at her in amazement.

"I said, take back whatever you bet, you and those other gentlemen," Ada said.

"Just how do you come into this, young lady?" the man asked.

"As successor to the former owner, John Dolan," she replied, her anger rising higher as she caught Knowlson's sneering expression.

"Please, Miss Kingsley, let me handle this," Lant said, his voice insistent, but respectful. "You don't understand." Turning to the silent men at the table, he went on. "As Miss Kingsley's representative and part owner of the Gate, I'd like to—"

Ada lifted her hand. "When I am present, I represent myself," she said. "I don't like fights at the Golden Gate, and I do not stand behind any cheating. If there has been any trickery on the part of anybody who is in the position of playing for the house, I apologize. Please get your money, sir. There will be no more poker games tonight."

"Hey! Give the lady boss a hand!" somebody at the bar shouted.

The burst of handclapping was almost deafening for a moment.

Ada's cheeks flushed, but she smiled.

SHE TURNED to Lant, who was hovering uneasily at her elbow.

"Pete Knowlson will not play poker at the Golden Gate again, under any circumstances," she said. "Please make that clear to him."

"Listen, Miss Kingsley," he protested in his most mellow and respectful voice, "you're mixing into something you really don't understand."

"I understand enough to know that you introduced this man as a friend of John Dolan's, which he definitely was not!" she cut in angrily. "You knew he had a bad reputation."

"Damn it, I won't take that, even from a girl!" Knowlson snarled, shoving men and chairs aside to confront Ada with an ugly twist of his thin mouth. "You've got a nerve to slander me—"

Brandy's fist crashed on Knowlson's jaw. He tottered, then hit the floor between table and chairs. Excited exclamations ran through the crowd as they stood on tiptoe to stare at what promised to be a rare fight.

Lunging forward, Brandy gripped Knowlson's right wrist before he could yank the gun from his shoulder holster. Twisting the arm sharply, Brandy dropped it and snatched the snub-nosed .38 from under the man's coat.

"Get up, and get out of here!" he ordered between his teeth.

Breaking the weapon, Brandy jerked out the cartridges, dropped them in his pocket and tossed the gun at Knowlson, who had rolled over and was scrambling awkwardly to his feet. He shot a look of sullen fury at Ada as he turned to stalk to a rear doorway.

Craig drew her hand firmly through his arm. "We're leaving," he said.

"Yes," Lant exclaimed, relief flickering across his strained face. "Miss Kingsley, this was most unfortunate. I wouldn't have had it happen for the world."

"Neither would I," Ada replied, giving

him a cold look. "If you want to manage the Gate there must be nothing more like that. I won't tolerate it."

"Certainly, Miss Kingsley. I shall do everything in my power to avoid unpleasantness," he assured her emphatically. "Rely upon that."

Turning, her glance caught Paula's expression of furious resentment. The dark eyes held the smouldering fire of an active enmity.

Ada and Brandy were silent until they were outside and headed for the Bell House. Then he exclaimed, "Now you see the sort of thing that happens in a gambling joint, and what you'll be up against if you hang on to that place."

"Yes, I see," she replied in a small, tired voice that held no defiance. She tightened her fingers on his arm, enjoying the consciousness of his protection.

Then footsteps came up behind them, and the ruddy-faced man fell in beside Ada.

"Beg pardon, miss," he said apologetically. "I just want to say I think it was mighty fine the way you took over that row I started. You made me feel like a heel, roaring around that way. I wasn't drunk, but I'd had a few shots of Scotch. Lost my head when I got mad. And I want to tell you that any time Anse Perkins can be of service to you, just send me an SOS." Taking a card from his wallet, he handed it to her.

"Thanks, Mr. Perkins," Ada said, "you are very kind."

"Not at all. Delighted to have you call on me any time," he assured her. "Now I'll say goodnight and let you get along home."

THE ELECTRIC sign outside the hotel burned with a clear, white radiance, but the lobby lights were lowered. As they went up the wide, shallow steps Ada shivered and pressed closer to Brandy.

"Somebody was peeking out of that window," she said. "I just glimpsed a face as it drew back. It startled me."

"We probably roused some guy who was sleeping in his chair," Brandy told her. "The bunch of old-timers who room at the Bell like to sit there watching the street before they doze off."

Opening the door, he went inside with her. Nobody was visible. Shadows filled the corners of the big room, and lay heavy in the alcove where the card table was set. Going on to the archway, he glanced down the empty hall where the brass knobs of closed doors gleamed softly in the subdued night light.

Craig dropped an arm about Ada and lifted her chin until she was looking up into his eyes. Then he bent his head and their cheeks touched.

The circling arm drew her closer, and she had the comfortable feeling of protection. Then he turned his face and his lips met hers with a warm, gentle pressure.

"Oh, Brandy," she murmured when he released her. "Thank you so much—for everything."

Reaching up, she brushed her fingers across his cheek, then turned and went swiftly down the hall. Unlocking her door, she glanced inside, waved a hand at Brandy and closed it behind her.

Craig went slowly through the lobby and into the street. Never had he encountered a girl like Ada Kingsley, yet it was strange how she reminded him of somebody. When she turned her head quickly, he had almost had it.

It was funny how she seemed scared one minute, and the next she'd be as spunky as they come. You wanted to protect and love her, yet you had a feeling that she'd fight with you shoulder to shoulder if there was need. And it wasn't prettiness alone that gave her a peculiar fascination, but some quality Brandy couldn't put into words.

He went around to an open lot at the rear of the hotel where he had left his car, reviewing the incidents of the evening. It would be fun to drive Ada out to the ranch through the shining moonlight, he thought, as he slid the key into the lock of his sedan.

Then he felt a thump on the back of his head, and he felt himself falling.

Gradually the sense of feeling returned to his body, and he lifted himself to an elbow. He was lying on ground plentifully strewn with small stones. The board fence at his

back cast a shadow over him, but the moonlight revealed the strip of vacant lot with the Bell House beyond. His car had vanished.

He sat up slowly, closing his eyes to overcome dizziness. Somebody had slugged him while he was in the act of opening his car. His pockets had been emptied, the one containing his wallet almost torn loose. And his feet were covered only with socks.

He got to his feet, cursing fervently when he stepped on a patch of stone that felt as if it had teeth. It was then he spied the boot, lying at the edge of the shadow. The other wasn't far off.

"Stole 'em, then couldn't get his feet into 'em," he exclaimed jubilantly.

Pulling on the boots, Craig headed for the street. It was deserted, but lights still shone from the saloons, and he guessed he hadn't been blacked out more than half an hour. The night air was cool on his forehead, and the dizziness cleared as he went along. By the time he arrived in front of the county jail building, his thoughts were sorting themselves into what seemed sensible reasoning. He rang the bell beside the entrance to the sheriff's quarters.

WEAVER opened the door, pants pulled on over his pajamas, his thick grey hair standing out like a fuzzy halo around his head.

"Brandy!" he exclaimed. "What th' hell you been doing? Have another fight with Knowlson?"

"No fight," Brandy replied sourly, "just a knockout."

Following the sheriff inside, he gave him a terse account of the attack.

"Humph!" Weaver grunted. "Looks like you and that Kingsley girl have ganged up to make me earn my pay, or else to start a crime wave in this county. Night before last she raised the yelp when Dolan was shot. Last evening Angie got me down to the Bell to trail a burglar that got into the girl's room. And it seems you was in on both those deals. Now you spring one on your own. Any ideas about who pulled it?"

"No," Brandy replied. "Knowlson was mad, but I can't see him stealing my car."

"Nope," Weaver said, "none of it was his style." He turned to the telephone. "First I'll notify the state police about the car. A brown, four-door, Chevvy sedan, wasn't it? Gimme the license number and any other details."

When he finished telephoning, he said, "Stretch out on that cot. You look like the devil. I'm going to take a look around the Bell lot, and I'll send Denton over to patch you up. Mebbe he can tell what kind of a weapon you was hit with."

Brandy had thought he felt all right, but he relaxed gratefully on the blanket-covered cot, and he wasn't too pleased when the doctor arrived and broke up his doze.

"Probably hit you with his gun butt," Denton said, when he finished scowling at the bumps on Craig's head. "Looks like he didn't want to kill you, but just wanted to get you out of the way for a while."

It wasn't long before the sheriff showed up again. Reaching into a side pocket of his leather jacket, he dropped several articles on the cot beside Craig. "Any of these belong to you?" he asked. "Picked 'em up on the ground along the fence."

"All of 'em," Brandy replied, picking up the wallet and opening it.

"What's missing?"

"Nothing from this, as I see," he replied. "Only thing I miss is the pipe tobacco from the pouch, and the car keys."

"Humph!" the sheriff growled. "Wonder what he dragged you back there and searched you for? Even pulled off your boots."

Brandy answered, grinning wryly, "He sure took a lot of trouble to get a few smokes."

Weaver was frowning. "The only thing I can figger off-hand," he said, "is that the crook didn't think you had enough dough to bother stealing it." He also grinned. "Looks to me like the car was his chief objective, but he won't get far with that. The license number and description is spread all around, and he can't cross the state line any place without being stopped. Anybody driving a brown, four-door Chevvy sedan is going to be out of luck in this country, for a bit."

Taking his bag, Denton turned to the door. "Get busy and round up these crooks, Bart," he said. "This is the second time you've routed me out in the dead of night to patch up one of their victims. 'Fraid you're slipping, when gunmen and thieves move in on us like this."

"Does look like it," Weaver grumbled as the doctor closed the door. "But shooting Dolan could have been a personal vengeance case. You never can tell, when a man's been a professional gambler, who may be out to get him. The thief at the Bell was petty stuff. But I've got a kind of hunch, Brandy, that this car steal has something more back of it than shows on the surface."

THE EXCITEMENT which stimulated Ada while she was at the Golden Gate had evaporated. In her room she lost the sense of protection and safety she had felt in Brandy's presence. And the bare spot on the floor where the maroon rug had lain was a stark reminder of her visitor and the mysterious disappearance of his body. For a brief time she had forced personal problems and fears into the background of her mind. Now they rushed forward, demanding attention.

The agent from the FBI had been too determined in his chase to abandon it willingly and allow his prisoner to go free. He most surely had not recovered his senses and fled. But who in Ute Springs could have been sufficiently interested to spirit away his unconscious—or dead—body? Whoever it was must have been in the hallway close to Ada's room during his search, and had understood what was happening. He must have entered and left through the hall door during the short period Ada had been with Brandy in the lobby. They had stood a little to the right of the archway, where neither had a view along the hall.

Instant action must have been taken. And enough people would have been in the street during that early hour of the evening so it would have been impossible for the man's body to have been lowered from the window to the sidewalk. There was no hiding place in the hall. One of the nearby rooms must have been used.

Ada's unnerved feeling increased as she arrived at a question far more difficult to answer. What had caused the FBI man's fall from the baggage rack? His injury had to be more than an ordinary bump to have caused so much bleeding. The end of the rug under his shoulders had been saturated.

Dropping into the chair where she had sat during his search, she struggled to recall every impression received during the time her eyes were closed.

She stared for some time at the narrow strip of wall and the door in front of her. Finally she drew a heavy sigh. Her eyes were troubled but decision tightened her lips. The FBI man was an agent of an important Government service. His disappearance was being regarded merely as the getaway of a thief. Proper search must be made for him, and it was up to Ada to bring this about. She was too tired to figure how, without giving her own identity away. But no matter what the effect on her, it must be done.

She still had no set plan when she left the hotel the next morning and headed for the sheriff's office. It seemed to her she had never seen so beautiful a day. She didn't want ever to leave Ute Springs. That she might be forced to return to New York and police custody had never seemed so unendurable a possibility. But she stepped along firmly, only the shadows in her blue eyes betraying her strain.

Ada had turned to mount the steps when Brandy Craig came around a corner of the County Building.

"Brandy!" she exclaimed. "In town so early?"

"Stayed in," he replied, grinning. "Slept at the jail."

"The jail?" She gave him a startled look. "Why'd they arrest you?"

He related briefly what had happened after he left the hotel the previous night.

"What are you doing around here?" he asked. "Don't you know the offices are closed on Sunday?"

"The sheriff's always on duty, isn't he?"

"Hey! You lay off Weaver," Brandy said with pretended alarm. "He says you and I keep him too busy."

"Sorry," she said, trying to speak lightly, "but my business is serious."

"You'll have to wait," Brandy told her. "The sheriff left about an hour ago. He had a phone call that there'd been an accident some place along Crooked Creek. Man killed. Here he comes now."

A DUSTY black sedan rolled in close to the curb, and Weaver sprang out. "Morning, Miss Kingsley," he said, crossing the walk briskly. "I was just going to look you up."

"I should have talked to you last night," Ada said. "I worried because I hadn't. That man in my room—I know he was unconscious and he couldn't have come to his senses and get away so quickly. He must have had help. I'm sure there's something queer about it. I think he should be looked for." She knew she was putting it badly, but the sheriff listened with an intentness that proved he considered her statement important.

"Suppose you tell me exactly what happened, and why you are so sure this man couldn't have come to his senses. Angie's report wasn't very detailed," Weaver said, studying Ada's changing expressions unobtrusively.

She replied without hesitation. "When he threw my handbag down he began searching my baggage. I was frightened and sat in a chair near the door with my eyes shut. When I heard him fall, I opened my eyes. He didn't get up, so I went over and looked at him. He'd hurt himself some way when he fell, and he was bleeding—I thought from his neck. He looked so dreadful—I ran," she finished hurriedly.

"Hurt, eh?" the sheriff said, pursing his lips? "How? What kind of a wound?"

"Why, I don't know," she replied doubtfully. "I didn't see it." She hoped the sheriff didn't see the pulse she felt beating hard in her throat.

"Was he a blond, light hair?" Weaver asked.

"Yes. The color of corn," she said.

"He *was* dead," the sheriff replied gravely. "We fished his body out of the edge of Crooked Creek a little while ago."

"Oh!" Ada said, bracing herself for the disclosure of the killer's identity.

"Presumably the body was dropped from the bridge a few hundred feet upstream. Water's running high, but the current's tricky and the body washed up on the first brushy point where the creek makes a sharp turn. It was found first thing this morning by a couple of fellows looking for strayed horses. And," Weaver paused impressively, "the guy had been stabbed from the back. Got him in the heart and killed him instantly. Murderer must have opened the door, stabbed the fellow as he stood there close, and beat it. What sort of sounds did you hear?"

"Only little noises, like his searching my things," Ada replied. "I was so frightened everything got mixed up."

Weaver nodded as if this was understandable.

"I don't get it!" Brandy exclaimed.

"I don't either, yet," the sheriff said, "but it'll all figger out."

"Who was he?" Ada asked, unable to endure any longer the strain of waiting for the announcement that the dead man had been an FBI agent.

"Dunno," the sheriff replied. "Wasn't a thing on him to show."

She inhaled a long, relieved breath. That the leather case with that terrible card of identification was missing seemed too wonderful to be true.

"I know the layout of those rooms along the lower hall at the Bell," Weaver said. "If this bird stood in front of the closet, the killer'd see him as soon as he opened the door a crack. The closet's right near the hall door, and the way that door opens, you wouldn't have seen the man even if you'd had your eyes open. He could have made that stab without hardly crossing the threshold. I think we'll go over and take a look around there. And we'll drop in at Denton's office, too, so Miss Kingsley can make positive identification."

THE DOCTOR'S office was only a few doors distant on a side street. Denton opened the door.

"This fellow may have been the thief

Miss Kingsley found in her room last evening," Weaver explained. "Let her have a look at him."

Denton led the way into a rear room.

Brandy slid a hand through her arm as she followed the sheriff to a long table. He turned back a corner of the sheet covering a long, bulky object. Shutting her teeth tight, Ada looked down at the features revealed by a drop light.

The yellow hair wasn't combed up in a crest, but it had dried enough to show its color. There was the beak-like nose, with the vertical scowl lines etched in above its bridge. Those were the thin lips that had been so tight and stern, and the hard jawline. This was the face of the man who had searched her room.

"Yes," she said, "it's he. I'm sure."

"He's a stranger around here," Weaver said as they turned from the table. "But I'll have a bunch of folks take a look at him, see if they remember noticing him in town yesterday. He's got well kept hands. Never did any hard work."

It was a relief to come out into the sunshine. Looking at the murdered man had been an ordeal, and she was glad Brandy didn't let go his grasp of her arm. The pressure of his strong, firm fingers was heartening.

When the trio entered the lobby at the Bell, Angie eyed them with sharp curiosity.

"You back again?" she greeted Weaver, no welcome in her voice.

"Yep. Got to look over them rooms a little more thoroughly," he said.

"That peeves me, Bart!" she exclaimed. "Disturbing those people again over a measly thief that didn't get away with a thing!"

"Nope, he didn't, Angie," the sheriff agreed meekly. "He only got murdered."

"Murdered!" Her rich voice rose to a squeak.

The sheriff explained tersely. "I want to check again on everybody registered on that first floor yesterday."

She complied promptly, anxiety puckering her plump cheeks until she looked like a child about to cry. "Eight, next to Ada, was empty," she said. "Seven, across from it, had two fellows, registered A. Smith and Rudolf Strunski, from Los Angeles. They'd paid and left before I was up. A lame guy, Yates, from Pittsburgh, has five, across from Ada. Four's a traveling salesman, been coming here for five years, and the rest are all regulars, live here the year 'round. You know 'em all as well as I do."

"Okay. I'll look at eight, seven and five."

"Listen, Bart, you woke that poor guy Yates up last night, after he took pills to get rid of arthritic pains. He can't move without two canes. Can't you count him out?"

Weaver shook his head. "Sorry, but I don't think his door was locked last night when we roused him. The murderer could have slid in there if Yates was sound asleep. Or he might know some little thing that'd help."

She yielded with a sigh. "I'll send Pando along to see if he doesn't want some breakfast in his room," she said. "He came here because the Valley View was too big an' noisy for him. He's the kind that don't kick about rates or charges for extra service. I don't want you running the poor fellow off. He might stay all summer if the climate agrees with him."

ADA WENT to her room to wait until the tour of inspection ended.

"The Law is baffled," Brandy replied to her questioning look, when he arrived with Weaver at her room.

"Not so much that I can't see the stabbing could have been done like I said," the sheriff said, indicating the position of the closet entrance with reference to the door from the hall. "The only noise the murderer made was probably the click when he turned the door-knob and with the blond man rummaging in the closet, he likely drowned the sound." When he was leaving, he said, "I'll wire L.A. and see if I can get anything on this Smith and Strunski. That seems the best lead I got here."

Ada went with them to the lobby. She looked at Brandy wistfully. "I don't suppose you'll be in again today?" she said.

"Depends," he replied. "Chink's been alone with the stock on the ranch most of the time since I took the carload of horses

to Denver. If Dad doesn't come in today, I might have to stick around till tomorrow. But I sure like your question. Sounds as if you may be building up that habit for my company."

"Could be," she retorted, laughing.

When he was around she could almost kid herself into believing things would work out happily. But whatever the result, Ada knew she was reaching greedily for every possible moment to be spent with Brandy. She had never imagined anybody as satisfactory as Brandy Craig.

Edwin Ripley was talking with Angie. He turned to Ada, shaking his head solemnly. "This is a most regrettable situation," he said. "I understand that you have become innocently involved in another crime. I want to assure you that Ute Springs has been free from any serious disorders since this land was taken over from the Indians. Weaver, this series of attacks and killings is a reflection on our community."

"Mebbeso," the sheriff agreed placidly. "But any place can be hit by a cyclone, or be struck by lightning half a dozen times, an' you couldn't say it was the fault of the citizens. I ain't educated up to high-falutin' words or theories, and I'm too busy tryin' to clean up the mess to waste time talkin' it over."

"Touchy," the attorney said, as Weaver went on to the doorway. "He's a good officer, but not much experienced with rapid-fire crime. He's got to stay right on his toes."

Murmuring a few words to Ada, Brandy followed the sheriff.

Ripley opened his wallet and took out a small key. Extending this to Ada, he said, "I forgot to give this to you yesterday. It opens a private compartment in the safe at the Golden Gate, where there are a few personal papers of Dolan's, and some trinkets which belonged to his wife. He told me that, and gave me the key and the safe combination for you." The lawyer added a card on which was printed in pencil a series of numbers. Then he gave her the key to the entrance.

When Ada thanked him, he said, "I had a few words with Lant this morning. He positively refuses to sell his interest in the Gate. You own the major share, three quarters, and can put a manager in his place. That would be difficult, if you have no acquaintances who are familiar with the gambling world. I advise you to permit me to take immediate steps to locate a buyer. Meantime, let Lant operate for you, or accept his offer to buy you out. He'll do that on a time proposition, I believe."

ADA AGREED to make a decision soon. Since her previous night's visit to the Gate, she had a clearer understanding of what it would mean to operate such a place. But there had been heady excitement in asserting her authority. During her entire life, Ada had never dominated either a person or a situation. After days of being a fugitive, there had been a peculiar thrill in exercising her suddenly acquired power. She couldn't hold the Gate long. But Dolan had willed it to her, and she didn't want to go against his emphatic request regarding Lant.

"Is that a recent paper?" she asked as the lawyer was leaving.

"Last night's edition, from Denver," he said, taking the folded newspaper from under his arm and handing it to her. "Keep it. I'll get another on my way home."

"Listen, kid," Angie said when the lawyer left them, "you ditch that outfit of Dolan's. I heard about the stunt you pulled last night. It went over big with the public but made the Gate bunch as sore as hell. Sylvester and Lant are buddies. They probably got Knowlson over here to pull some fast ones while Lant was boss.

"Perkins was here once before. He's got oil interests over in Oklahoma. They figured on taking him for a coupla thousand or so, maybe. You butted in and killed the game. And is that black-eyed, white-haired pal of Syl's sore at you! Syl's share of the take would mebbe have bought her a fur coat. Sell out, kid, before that bunch gets in some really dirty work on you!"

"I don't want to sell to Oscar Lant," Ada said. "But thanks for being interested." Her voice held obvious sincerity.

Angie Bell gazed reflectively after her. "Nice kid," she murmured, "but I'll be darned if I can figure her out."

Ada hurried to her room, eager to examine the paper. As soon as the door was closed, she spread the front page wide. Then she seemed to freeze, only her eyes moving as she devoured the lead feature. The headline said the New York police promised an arrest soon in the Winthrop murder case.

Ada's glance raced over the sentences, picking up the high spots. They believed they had the name of the mysterious secretary, and were about to take her into custody. They had proof that, in addition to his swindling, Winthrop was in a big smuggling deal. A passenger on an ocean liner had admitted giving Winthrop a fabulously valuable bracelet and necklace to bring ashore. The necklace had been recovered, but the diamond and ruby-studded flexible gold bracelet, valued at twenty-five to thirty thousand dollars, was still missing. FBI and United States Customs had united in efforts with police. Arnold Beatty had proved to be a pal of Winthrop's, but had cleared himself of suspicion. Certain underworld characters were involved, and an exposé was promised.

Her heart hammering fast, Ada dropped to the side of the bed and read the article a second time, wincing as she reached the theory advanced by the correspondent. Winthrop had feared he was under suspicion and had given the bracelet to the girl, planning to recover it later. Then she had conspired with a boy friend to kill Winthrop, so they could keep the jewels.

NONE of this was true, but how could she prove Winthrop had not given her anything to keep for him? Every moment of the short interview in his office that morning was clear in her memory. Winthrop had been there when Ada arrived. He'd said he decided he hadn't enough material to complete his book. It was going to take two or three months to assemble it, but if she wanted to return to her job of typing the script then, he would be pleased. He had given her a week's salary in place of notice, and left the office while she was collecting the few personal things she kept there in her briefcase. She had remained but a few minutes after Winthrop's departure.

It had been the dead FBI agent who was on her trail. And he had given Ada the impression nobody else knew of his movements. In that case, so long as his disappearance remained a mystery to the authorities, she might be safe. If she could make a quick sale of the Golden Gate, she might go to Mexico or South America. But perhaps she could be brought back from there. And Ada didn't want to go to either place.

"I'll stay right here," she decided. "Running away wouldn't get me anywhere except into more trouble, probably."

There was nobody to ask for advice. If she talked to Brandy it would put him in a tough spot. As John Dolan had advised her, she must play her hand as she saw it herself.

So it had been a bracelet, or the diamonds and rubies from its setting, that the FBI agent believed she had. Speculations scurried through her mind. Someone had known he was trailing Ada and had followed him.

The agent had been killed because it was believed he had recovered the bracelet. But he hadn't.

Would his murderer think the bracelet was still in Ada's possession? That wasn't a pleasant thought. It was still more unpleasant to imagine he might have also been the murderer of Winthrop. To escape further alarming suggestions that popped into her mind, she went to the dining room.

THE TABLES were filled with diners, and their talk, and the stir of waitresses moving back and forth, were welcome. She discovered that she was hungry, and by the time her dessert was brought to her, a slight feeling of optimism was coloring her thoughts.

Then a slim, snub-nosed young fellow slid into the opposite chair.

"Remember me?" he asked with a grin of cheerful impudence.

"Yes, indeed," Ada assured him promptly. "You're Buzz Cady, the bold reporter from the *Comet*. What do you want this time?"

"Same thing—talk," he replied.

Ada shook her head, her lips obstinate.

"Look here sister," he said, "I gave you a whacking good write-up the other day, when you were such a crab. Didn't I?"

"I didn't read it," Ada replied indifferently.

"Well, it was good enough to be syndicated," Buzz told her. "I sure put you over in a big way. And I've got a whizz of an opening for this one, about the lady boss taking over the Golden Gate. Gosh, I was there when you pulled that stunt. Please, be the lovely, blue-eyed gal you look, and give me a few words."

"I don't care for newspaper publicity," Ada said.

Leaning his elbows on the table, Buzz gave her a searching gaze.

"Why?" he asked. "The *Comet* isn't a lurid tabloid. Never heard of a girl before who wasn't tickled silly to be quoted in the paper. It looks queer, as if you had some special reason for avoiding attention."

Ada managed a light laugh. "That's as ridiculous as everything else you say," she said. "I'm not important enough to rate quoting. It seems foolish. But since you annoy me so much, I'll say this to get rid of you." Ada paused briefly to get control of her quick breathing. She hoped he hadn't noticed her shakiness when he accused her of avoiding attention. "I think it was wonderful, like waking up and finding you'd discovered Aladdin's lamp, to suddenly be willed a piece of property by a stranger. It's exciting to own a place like the Gate. Will that do?"

Buzz laughed. "You're awfully young, aren't you? But you're cute. Believe I could do a syndicate article on you—the girl who came from nowhere into a little Rocky Mountain town, fought a gunman, inherited a gambling spot and started right in to run it."

"Oh, please!" Ada lifted a protesting hand. But she was careful to laugh, not make her objection seem serious.

"Too modest," Buzz told her as he stood up. "Don't try to be a blushing violet, it doesn't suit your style."

Ada sighed when he had gone. Was there to be no end to the tough spots she hit? She couldn't guess how much damage the impudent *Comet* reporter might do her. She would have been more disturbed had she glanced around and caught him staring back at her with a concentrated interest in his narrowed eyes.

THE AFTERNOON dragged. Ada was too fidgety to take a nap, and she didn't want to go out and walk around the town alone. For some time she hoped Brandy might return. Then she decided it was too late to continue looking for him. It was then, idly fussing around the room, that she spied the two keys the attorney had given her, the one to the Golden Gate, and the tiny one for the compartment in the safe.

The Gate was closed on Sunday. What better time to go and open the safe and take out whatever personal items Dolan might have stored there?

Five minutes later she was crossing the lobby. Angie wasn't visible, and not many of the chairs were occupied. Nobody appeared to notice her as she went quietly to the outer doorway.

With the stores closed, the sidewalks nearly empty of pedestrians, and only an occasional car passing, Main Street had a deserted look. It was something of a surprise when the young woman who came around the main corner was Paula Sylvester. Bare-headed, her platinum hair had a silver sheen under the late afternoon sun. The mascaraed lashes formed a too-heavy fringe around her eyes, intensifying their darkness and adding to their hard expression. Her lip curled as she recognized Ada, then formed a set smile.

"Hi!" she said as she came near. "How's the lady boss today?"

"Fine," Ada replied, trying not to show her dislike of the other girl.

"You ought to of stuck around till the boys counted up last night," Paula went on. "Syl said the percentage ran pretty

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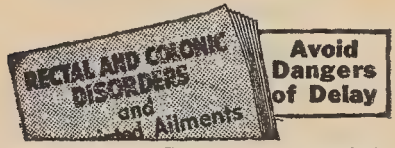

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good for the house." A barely discernible sneer emphasized the words. "Thought you'd be out with your boy friend, seeing the country."

"Afraid I haven't been here long enough to have one," Ada replied.

"How about Brandy?" Paula asked. "He sure put on an all-out act for you at the Gate. Everybody says you've got that cowboy roped and tied."

Ada shrugged. "What everybody says is like the wind blowing," she retorted.

Paula sniffed. "Something causes the wind, don't it? Well, be seeing you tomorrow night, I suppose. 'Bye, now."

Ada went across the street toward the Golden Gate. Paula took a few steps, then halted to watch Ada. When she arrived at the entrance and inserted her key in the lock, Paula turned and hurried back around the corner in the direction from which she had come.

Venetian blinds were drawn to the window-sills, and the only light entering the long room was through the glass door on which the gate was painted, masking much of its surface. The mirror behind the bar held hazy reflections and gave off strange glints. Tables and chairs were dim forms, and the interior had not only a look of gloom but suggested the habitation of ghostly figures.

Withdrawing her key, Ada closed the door, making sure the lock caught. She wasn't afraid. What she feared couldn't possibly be shut inside the Gate.

A walled-off section in a corner of the room, near the rear entrance, must be the office. The door opened at a touch, revealing an interior about ten feet square. This contained a roll-top desk, two straight-backed, wooden chairs, and a safe. Dim light entered through a small window of heavily frosted glass, high in the wall above the desk. Reaching up, she pulled the chain of an electric bulb, and the room's contents sprang into clear view.

The desk top was rolled back, revealing a bewildering hodgepodge.

Placing her handbag on the desk, Ada took from it the card with the safe combination and the tiny key. Then she knelt on the floor in front of the big steel box.

Working slowly, she shifted the dial to different points. Presently the heavy door swung open.

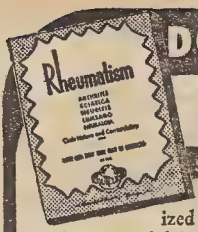
THE SEVERAL open compartments contained clipped packets of papers, a ledger, and a few envelopes held by a rubber band. Two drawers with brass knobs were set in the middle, one above the other. Below these was a small keyhole in the metal front of a closed compartment. Opening the top drawer first, she saw that it contained stacks of silver quarters and half dollars. In the back was a canvas bag she judged held smaller coins. The second drawer was packed with currency, sorted into individual denominations, ones, fives, tens and twenty-dollar bills.

She had pushed in the drawer and was fitting the key into its tiny lock, when she caught a squeaking sound from the main room, as if a foot had stepped on a loose floorboard.

Jumping to her feet, she went to the open door to peer through the dimness of the outer room. There was no hint of movement anywhere. The silence inside the building seemed to push against her eardrums, it was so intense. But the wind was rising. A gust swept along the outside wall, slapping something against it. A storm was blowing up.

With a shrug of disgust for her nervousness she went back to the safe and turned the key. The metal door of the compartment opened. In the bottom were some letters and papers. On top of these lay several small, tissue-wrapped packets. Glancing through the papers first, Ada saw that one was a deed for the Golden Gate lot. The letters appeared to be personal, and she laid them aside.

Her curiosity aroused, she started opening the packets. One contained three small, gold nuggets. Others held brooches



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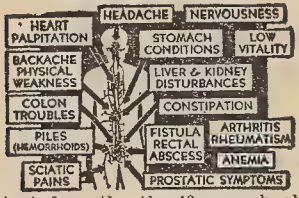

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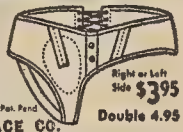

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or rings of probably moderate value. The largest and most carefully wrapped of the small parcels was left until last. Breaking the seals of this, she unfolded the paper.

Two pieces of jewelry caught the light and sparkled up at her from their soft, white bed. The brooch was a gold shamrock leaf set with small green stones and diamond chips. The inch-wide gold band of the bracelet was exquisitely etched with a pattern of the same leaves. One at the center was raised above the background and thickly studded with the same stones.

Turning them, she saw the name "Molly" engraved on the inside of each. The bracelet bore an added inscription, "To My Dear Wife on her Birthday, June First, 1900."

She cuddled them against her cheek, and then clasped the shining bracelet around her wrist.

WHEN she was tucking the letters into her handbag, it occurred to her that much as she wanted to keep the jewelry with her, the safe was a much more secure place than her hotel room. For the present she would return them to the compartment.

She was locking this, kneeling in front of the safe, when she became conscious of a stirring of air. There had been no warning sound, but she knew that somebody was in the office so close to her that she could feel the slight air current caused by his movement.

Fingers closing rigidly on the key, Ada turned her head and started to jump to her feet. A hand slapped heavily across her eyes at the same instant fingers closed fast about her throat. Ada summoned all her strength to writhe free from the strangling grip. The key spun from her fingers and hit the floor with a sharp tinkle, as she tore at the hand clamped on her throat.

The roaring in her ears grew louder. Then her senses dulled and blacked out, and Ada slid limply to the floor.

(To be continued in the next issue)

Ernest Tubbs Fan!

Dear Editor:

How about putting my letter in Our Air Mail? I am stationed here at Kirtland Air Force Base. I am lonely and would love to receive letters. I promise to answer every one. Now about myself, I am 22 years old, stand about 6' and weigh 190 lbs. Besides writing, my favorite hobby is both listening to and dancing to hill-billy music. My favorite singer is Ernest Tubbs.

S/SGT. CECIL MARRS

4906th Ms #64
Kirtland AFB
Albuquerque, N. M.

Book Boy

Dear Editor:

This is my first time at trying to get my letter published. I've written to a few people who had their names printed but I never had much luck that way so I thought I should have my name printed and see if I do better. I am 30 years old, weigh 150 lbs. and stand 5'9". I have brown hair and eyes and am of Irish descent. I live on a farm with my folks and have a lot of spare time to write letters. I like all sports but my main hobby is reading books and writing letters. I would like to hear from all of you.

JIMMIE CHEW

Rte. #1, Box 46,
Rossville, Ill.

Servicemen Note!

Dear Editor:

I would very much like to have pen pals from every state in the Union, especially from the cattle country. I have brown eyes, reddish brown hair. I stand 5'3" and am 22 years old. I will exchange snaps with everyone. I cook, sew, draw and design. I love to write letters, read and dance. During the war I wrote many letters to servicemen, and if possible I would like to renew acquaintances.

CAMILLIA DANVER

354 E 21 St.
N. Vancouver, B. C.

Two Dicks and an Eddie

Dear Editor:

There are 3 of us who are very lonely and are sending our plea to you so that some people will write to us. All of us are on a tour of duty in the Navy, stationed on a ship in Arabia, and writing letters is about the only recreation we get. Richard (Dick) Stokowski is 6' tall, has light brown hair, weighs 160 lbs. Richard (Dick, too) Bolduc is 5'7", has black curly hair, and weighs 165 lbs. Edwin (Eddie) Lezon is 5'10" tall, has dark brown hair, weighs 180 lbs. The two Dicks are 18 and 19, and Eddie is 21 years old. Please, everyone, write us some letters. We'll answer them all.

RICHARD STOKOWSKI, SKSN
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Adventurer

Dear Editor:

I'd like to get into your pen pal column and make some new pals. I'm a university student who'd like to hear from lovely ladies from all over the world. My life has been spent seeking adventure, excitement and romances. I was a paratrooper in the Army and upon discharge went back to college. I'm 31 years old, but have had lots of experiences, and so feel at home with both young and old people. I like all sports, particularly outdoor ones such as riding, sailing, and flying airplanes. I like to hunt and fish, but haven't found time for these since before the war. I've studied French and Spanish and a little Russian. I'll answer anyone who will write and I'll be watching for the mailman.

JOHN DABBS

Box 7214
Los Angeles 37, Calif.

Displaced Country Gal

Dear Editor:

Hope you have room in your mail box for a lonely country gal working in the city. I am 20 years old, 5'5" tall, and weigh 136 lbs. I have brown hair and eyes, and two big dimples. My hobbies are writing letters, roller skating, square dancing, and collecting buttons. I have a good sense of humor. I'm sure I'll find some interesting pen pals if all you fellows and girls will write to me.

JEAN WILSON

308 So. Oak St.
Normal, Ill.

MAYBE you've wondered what a world champion cowboy can do after he retires from the rodeo ring. Well, it looks as if Jerry Ambler has found the answer. After 23 years of sticking in the saddle, Jerry is now going to get paid for falling out of it.

He has just been hired by Columbia Pictures to get thrown from broncs in the Gene Autry movie *Beyond the Purple Hills*. Whenever Hollywood producers want a stunt man to do something badly, they always hire somebody who can do it well. Any dude can fall off a horse, but only a top-hand can fall off when and how he's told to.

Jerry, who was the champion saddle bronc-rider of the IRA and RCA in 1946 and of the IRA in 1947, has long since proved he knows just about everything concerning horses except how to be bucked off them. He was breaking his own mounts on his father's ranch in Milburn, Alta., Canada, by the time he was eight. He got to like the wild ones. "I never rode a quiet horse to school," he says, "after I was ten."

He thinks a talent for bronc-riding is inborn.

"There's plenty you can learn from teaching and experience," he admits, "but you've got to have the natural ability to start with."

It's different with ropers, according to Jerry. Almost anyone with natural athletic ability can learn to be a top-notch roper if he works hard enough at it, but the best bronc-riders are born, not made.

And it's not brute force that keeps him in the saddle, but balance. Next time you're at a rodeo, watch the way the best riders sit their broncs. You'll notice that they manage to stay squarely in the saddle. They seem to anticipate which way the horse is going next. Those riders are balance riders who get the feel of the horse and time their movements with his.

"Perfect timing is the secret," Jerry will tell you. "When a horse is in the air I have my spurs in his neck. When he's on the ground I have my spurs in his belly. I balance my whole body with the rein."

Jerry entered his first rodeo in 1927 when he was 16. The stock for the show had been furnished by his father, but familiarity didn't do the youngster much good. The horse he drew was a tough one that had already bucked him off three times when he'd been practicing at home on the ranch. Naturally he was pretty discouraged, coming out of the chute. But he took a deep breath, gritted his teeth and that time he made it—and also won the day money.

The years he won the world titles, Jerry took money at all the top rodeos in the United States and Canada. New York, Denver, Calgary, Fort Worth, Pendleton, Houston, San Francisco, all paid him day monies and handed him trophies.

Those two years of consistent winning proved to Jerry that it takes brains as well as muscles to be a champion. He spent almost all his leisure studying horses.

"It used to be," he said in an interview in *Rodeo News*, "that you'd go to a rodeo and wonder if you'd draw a horse you could ride. Now you wonder if you'll draw a horse you can win on. Bucking horses aren't what they once were. There's a few top ones but not half so many as a few years ago. You better learn the bucking habits of these few top ones, if you want to place high."

Among the "top ones" Jerry has ridden are Kickapoo and Why Bar Me. He thinks he's the only cowboy who has ridden the

latter five times. Although some authorities say that Doff Aber was the last cowboy to ride Hell's Angels, Jerry says the records give him the distinction.

The toughest bucking horse he ever rode was Five Minutes to Midnight.

"I drew at Ol' Five for 15 years before I ever got a chance to ride him," says Jerry. "That was in Portland in 1943. I was riding easy, and I thought I had him. All of a sudden he took one jump, and I was in the air with the rein still in my hand. Right then the whistle blew."

Being a balance rider, Jerry always looks relaxed in the ring. Outside the arena, though, he's as nervous and fidgety as a bee-stung colt. He checks and rechecks every item of gear on himself and his bronc, but once out of the chute all his nerves disappear and his painstaking attention to detail pays off.

After the ride he'll hang around watching the other riders and their broncs. His eyes are narrowed, and he shifts from foot to foot, fiddling with his hat, adjusting his belt, while he seems to memorize every buck, spin and kick of the horse in the ring. It takes a long time of watching for Jerry to make his mind up about the best way to master a given bronc. Once he's decided, he'll stick to it, and usually he'll stick to the bronc, too. There are some cowboys, though, who think he's a little too stubborn about his opinions, and that he might sometimes do better if he didn't plan his strategy but just depended on his reflexes.

It's worked well enough for him, however, and he uses the same kind of careful planning in his business and personal affairs.

He has been married for fifteen years to Millie Kerr, the small red-haired daughter of a Scotch minister. She was born in England but came with her family to Saskatchewan where Jerry and she were married. They have a son, Jerry, Jr., whom they call Billy.

Following the rodeo circuit, the Amblers have had lots of homes—sometimes a trailer and sometimes a ranch. During the war they lived in St. Helena, Ore., and Jerry drove 40 miles every day to work in the Portland shipyards, leaving Millie in charge of 65 head of dairy cattle. A dynamo of energy, Jerry milked the cows every morning before he went to work.

When the war was over, he took a few days off and entered a rodeo just to see if he'd lost his knack. He hadn't—he won $700. So that was the end of the shipyard job and of that particular ranch.

Later they bought another ranch in Glenwood, Wash., which they sold in 1948 to move to Burbank, Calif., and go into the restaurant business with rodeo veteran Wag Blesing.

Jerry says he's had it as far as regular rodeoing goes. But it's still fun to reminisce about the exciting moments. One of his biggest thrills was at the Calgary Stampede in 1946. Being a Canadian, Jerry always liked to win that one. When it came to the last go-round, Jerry was in the lead, but he drew for his final try a tough bronc named Old Bill, which had already bucked off three cowboys.

"That bronc really looked rough to me," says Jerry. "I was far enough ahead so that I could win the event with just an average ride, but I sure enough wouldn't win if I got bucked off. For once in my life I'd have liked to draw a real loafer. I came out of the chute trying to sit my saddle squarely but expecting to sit the dirt any minute. But for some reason, a horse was on my side for once. I rode him real easy, and I won."

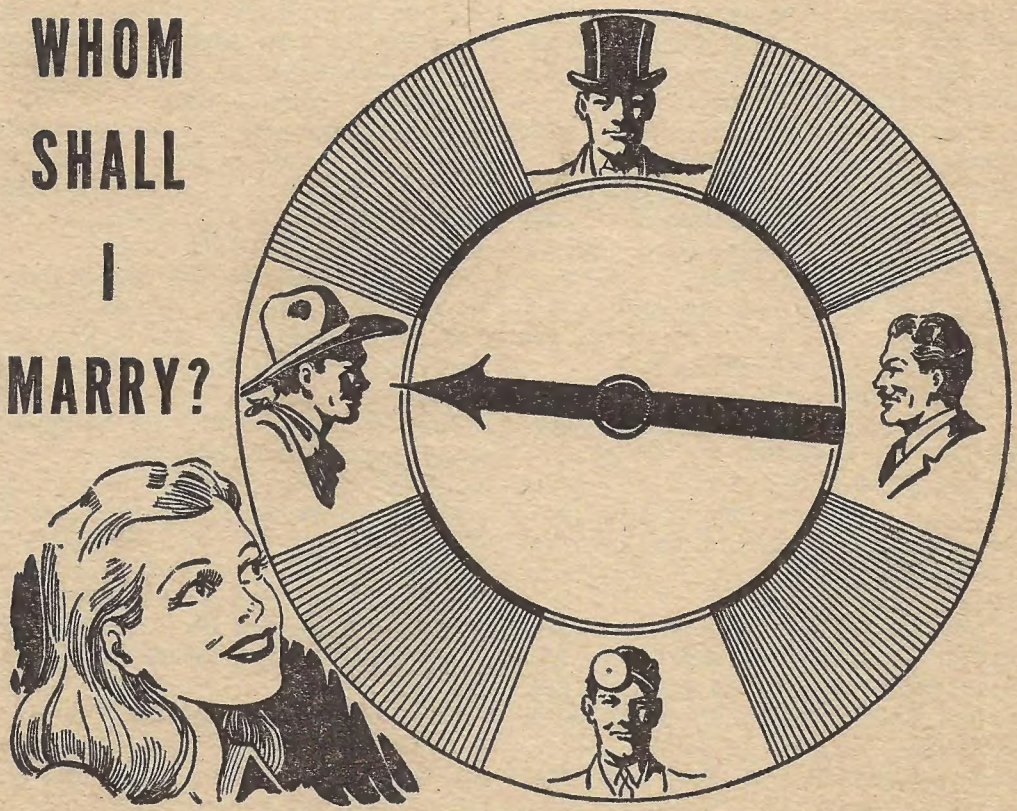
Jerry enjoys looking over his trophies, too. Millie keeps the belt buckles and the silver cups all polished up, and she loves to show off Jerry's gold-inlaid spurs and the small matching pair which belong to Billy.

So the next time you go to the movies and see a cowboy who looks as though he can't handle a sunfishing bronc, remember that the cowboy may be one of the best bronc-handlers of all time. A fellow named Jerry Ambler, who knows how to out-think a horse. A fellow whom rodeo fans and rodeo riders will be missing as the new season rolls along.

Adios,

THE EDITORS

WHOM SHALL I MARRY?



By Professor Marcus Mari

Girl of Taurus ***April 20 to May 20***

KATE SMITH, Shirley Temple, Bing Crosby, Anne Baxter and Lionel Barrymore were all born under this second sign of the zodiac, Taurus. So were Brahms, Freud and Shakespeare. It's a sign unusually rich in famous names. Despite the illustriousness of some Taureans, the main drive behind them is not ambition. It is an almost frantic need for security. No matter how much of the world's goods a Taurus girl has, she cannot relax. She feels she must drive herself always to further successes.

The Taurus girl is highly emotional, almost tense. She has a large capacity for love and affection. However, she hides these flames behind a quiet, stolid exterior. She waits for love, she does not seek it out. Once having settled her emotional life, she is loyal and content, demanding only one thing—emotional security. Her life-partner must never shake her faith in him. She is best off married to a man who firmly believes that she's the only woman in the world.

She is stubborn, proud, and often demanding. To offset these qualities, she has infinite patience, is intuitive, and very conscientious. Ths last trait makes her excellent on a job requiring an eye for detail. She does not take criticism particularly well, but on the other hand, she seldom offers it. She has the ability to make the most of what she has and whatever situation she finds herself in. She is not at her best at quick decisions, but needs time to arrive at a conclusion. Once having arrived, nothing can shake her.

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